

Missing Christmas

Philippians 3:1-6

Introduction: "Missing Christmas" sounds like the latest *Hallmark* Christmas movie (probably starring Candace Cameron Bure --- like most of them). But missing Christmas is not only a serious thing, it is nothing new. When Jesus entered into humanity the first time as a baby in a manger, most people in Bethlehem were unaware of what was going on in their little town. Only shepherds came in from the fields to worship the King born for them. Political figures, religious leaders, and everyday folks missed the seemingly inconsequential birth of a Jewish boy to a poor family. Perhaps we can give a break since it is almost absurd that the One for whom all things were created and by whom all things sustain (Col. 1:15-16) would enter into the world with angelic hosts that appeared to lowly shepherds rather than an entourage of nobility and royalty.

Today we are much more aware of the events of Jesus' incarnation, but we are just as prone to miss Him. What was missed in anonymity is now missed through excess. What people missed at His birth through lack of knowledge we miss today by an overabundance of it. But missing Christmas is not just about our lives in December. Missing Christmas is all about our souls and what place Jesus Christ has in our life, whether Lord or sentimental figure, Savior to savor or moral man that calls us to try harder. The sentiment of Christmas in our culture seems warm and inviting, but anything less than seeing Christ is truly a false teaching, one that gets close to the message, only to lead people away to judgment.

In light of this, think with me of all the reasons you hear that people will offer up as to why they believe they are saved, or at least are not under God's judgment. These are especially prominent at Christmastime:

- **Pointing to a PAST EVENT** - Often we can bank on or look to something in our past, especially when we were kids, that give us assurance of our faith: I raised my hand, went forward, prayed a prayer asking Jesus in my heart, or made a decision at some point. These things are not inherently wrong, but in themselves do NOT produce salvation nor are they evidence of genuine faith. Genuine faith will produce a transformed life, while dead faith will not (James 2:14-26).
- **Pointing to our OWN MORALITY** - The stress here is on our own version of morality and goodness. We tend to compare downward instead of upward, seeing ourselves as better than others, feeling a sense of vindication since we don't do the bad other people do or we are a bit better in our effort or execution. We forget that God looks at the heart (1 Sam. 16:7) and when outward righteousness does not match an inward change, Jesus called it hypocrisy, whitewashed tombs full of dead mans bones (Matt. 23:26-28). This was the stumbling block for the rich young ruler in Mark 10 who possessed morality but an unwillingness to leave his wealth to follow Jesus. Morality or goodness alone can only condemn us, not save us, for all our deeds are merely polluted garments (Isa. 64:6 - filthy rags).
- **Pointing to KNOWING THE FACTS** - Knowledge is important since we believe what is true and put faith in what we have heard. However, knowledge that stays in our minds alone cannot save, since the demons believe and know the facts of the gospel, they shudder, and yet they are not redeemed (James 2:19). My best friend growing up in church and Christian school was the guy who could spin people around in theological discussions, but he never truly believed it for his own life. This is sometimes the most dangerous combination that keeps people from missing

Christmas, where there is enough knowledge to become dangerous and to **think** they are saved when they are truly lost.

- **Pointing to RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY** - We can point to things like church attendance, baptism, taking communion, and serving in a ministry as reasons we are saved, but unless these are **results** rather than **means**, they do nothing for us. Isaiah 29:13 and Matthew 15:8-9 both communicate the same point in the Old and New Testament: "**These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.**" Whenever one would point to what **they've done** as reason for salvation, Jesus responded "*depart from me, I never knew you, you workers of lawlessness.*"

How do we make sure we don't miss Christmas? How do we differentiate between false assumptions and true realities? This is exactly what Paul addressed in first 11 verses of chapter 3 where he calls out the false teachers and used the most clear and powerful tool to counteract their teaching: *his own testimony.*

Foundation for Missing Christmas (1-3)

*"Finally my brothers, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you. **Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh. For we are the circumcision who worship by the Spirit and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh.***

Actively guarding against false confidence

There truly was no church like Philippi, and they were lauded by Paul for their faith. However, just like any group of gathered believers, there was actual and potential issues they had to deal with and beware of. There were conflicts within as well as pressure from without. This is exactly what we face today as there is always going to be interpersonal struggles, misunderstanding, and lack of compassion between us, as well as a world that will no longer tolerate the truth that we hold. Perhaps, however, the greatest threat to any church is NOT interpersonal conflict or external pressure, but rather **false teaching** from within, that kind of teaching which has some level of merit and substance, but in the end leads people down a path of destruction. Paul was very clear that the church had to **BEWARE, be on guard against this type of teaching.**

False understanding

Paul does not name a specific group, but it is clear that the false teaching had to do with Jewish believers, as opposed to Jews outside of the church, who were bringing in old realities into the new of the gospel of Jesus. The teachers of Judaizers was that Gentile (non-Jewish) Christians had to submit to the Mosaic Law, especially those distinct of the covenant, to truly be saved. They taught a man-centered, works based, legalistic gospel, and it was confronted by Paul in several NT epistles. Paul called the church to **beware**, in an ongoing, active way. They had to be on guard, look out for, and be diligent to not allow certain types of teaching in. I was talking with a buddy this week and he was asking about folks in his neighborhood who were practicing chanting as a way of personal empowerment. He asked how we know what is true and false, what works and does not. The answer is simple: know the truth. If I know what the truth looks like, and compare everything to it, the false becomes visible, like examining a real \$100 bill, then a fake one.

Paul called the false teachers **three different names** to describe the same thing. He also was **contrasting the false with the true.**

- **Beware of the dogs** - These were not house pets nor domesticated animals seen as members of the family. These were wild dogs that roamed the streets in packs, scavenging for food and wounded prey. The irony here was typically the Jews referred to Gentiles as this type of dog, and here he was referring to those who required works for salvation. This was not a compliment, nor was he trying to be PC.
- **Beware of the Evil Workers** - They were evil since they were teaching a false hope, requiring righteous living that they themselves could not attain (much like the Pharisees in Matt. 23:4, 15)
- **Bewared of those who mutilate the flesh** - This was the key teaching and main misunderstanding having to do with the practice of **circumcision**, a sign given by God to Abraham for Israel.

You can see where false teaching could originate and how it could permeate and create damage. Those claiming belief in Jesus would show passages of the Old Testament, leading new believers to question themselves and perhaps the teaching of Paul, and they would be compelled to act NOT BY FAITH but to begin to trust in something they did (or was done to them), and this would upset the faith of many.

False hope

In Genesis 17:11, God made a covenant with Abraham, saying *"You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you."* The promise of God to Abraham was that he'd be "father of a multitude of nations" (17:5), he'd be exceedingly fruitful, that kings and nations would come from him (17:6), and it would be an everlasting covenant (17:7), including all the land of Canaan (17:8). God would keep His end of the bargain and expected the generations to follow to do. And they did.

The nation and people of Israel followed this command with a few exceptions. When Joshua entered the promised land, he had to circumcise all those born in the wilderness before battling Jericho (Josh. 5). Extending into the time of Jesus and NT, the Jewish people continued to practice this external sign of a covenant with God. This type of action was **distinctive, a source of pride, and easily became the point, instead of pointing to something greater**. What was God really after? Did He require this simply for hygiene? Was it just a weird way to identify a people? The point of circumcision and point of the symbol was for Israel the same as it is today: **God wants our hearts**.

Jeremiah 4:4 - *Circumcise yourselves to the LORD; remove the **foreskin of your hearts**, O men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem; lest my wrath go forth like fire, and burn with none to quench it, because of the evil of the deeds.*

Deuteronomy 10:16 - Circumcise therefore **the foreskin of your heart** and be no longer stubborn.

Israel had done what so many could do today. They placed confidence on something **external** that they could point to as their standing before the Lord, when their hearts were far from God. But is this only an Old Testament reality?

Romans 2:25-29 - For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision. So, if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? Then he who is physically uncircumcised but keeps the law will condemn you who have the written code and circumcision but break the law. **For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and**

physical. But a Jew is on inwardly and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God.

The symbol is one that shows that God has rolled back the sin of our heart, giving us something new, a new heart (Jer. 31:31-34; 2 Cor. 5:17). What God brings in second birth (according to the Christmas song) or by being born again is replacing a heart of stone with a heart of flesh. God wants all of us, not simply box checking, externally conformed actions. Paul contrasts the works based teaching with what this type of transformation looks like.

Confidently living out true realities

...For we are the circumcision...

The contrast is one between **external and internal**, one generated by **God's hand vs human hands, and one that brought new life and real change vs that which was merely human effort**. Each of these is distinctive and only possible in the transformation brought by God in Christ.

Worship by the Holy Spirit

We were created to worship in all that we did, but sin marred that opportunity and ability. Worship was the intended makeup of our life, the all consuming passion and desire of our heart. The fact that we relegate it to merely singing or in a service shows our gross misunderstanding of what God desires. Jesus told the Samaritan woman at the well that God is seeking those who will worship Him in Spirit and truth (John 4:23), meaning a like regenerated by the work of the Holy Spirit who guides us in the truth so that we can unleash our affections for God and the service of others. **What does this type of worship look like?** Look at **Deut. 10** again.

Right before He called for the circumcision of heart, God called the people to:

"And now Israel, *what does the Lord your God require of you*, **but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways, to love Him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments and statutes of the LORD**, which I am commanding you today for your good?"
(Deut. 10:12-13)

This is what it looks like for us to worship today, which is why we can confidently say we worship God every day, at work, in recreation and rest, in relationship and service. We seek to **fear, walk, love, serve, and keep God's commandments**, to render respectful spiritual service to Him which can only come from the work of the Spirit.

Boast in Jesus Christ

The way we "glory in Christ Jesus" is to boast with joy in the person that we are most proud of, Him whom we treasure the most. As humans we are prone to glorying in self: **self-confidence, self-righteousness, self-pity, self-reliance**. We like to take credit for our accomplishments and place blame in our failures. But the mark of true transformed and circumcised hearts is that we boast in Christ alone for all things, deflecting any praise from ourselves to Him. This is the measuring stick for us, especially at Christmas time.

Denounce self-confidence

Flesh is that part of us that is unredeemed humanity, that part of us that is still bound by a broken world and resultant from a sin nature. Though we are no longer bound to the flesh (Rom. 7:5; 8:8-9), we still live in this fleshly body that is going to sin (Gal. 2:20). But here, specifically, it refers to **anything and everything external** that we would boast or glory in as far as our standing before God. It is a denouncement of **self-trust**, a vote of "**NO CONFIDENCE**" to our motives and actions. This is not only imperative to salvation, its imperative to continued change. In every counseling scenario I've ever been a part of (including my own marriage and friendships), everyone is prone to putting confidence in their flesh. IT comes out as self-justification, owning only **part of their responsibility, or hiding some of the truth, or placing blame on another**. When God changes our heart, we can come clean with it all, knowing that it ALL HAS BEEN MADE CLEAN, so we no longer have to hide, cover, or dodge what God wants to do for us, from the inside out.

Illustration of Missing Christmas (4-6)

though i myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews, as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless."

In talking about trust in external means for salvation, Paul used himself as the ultimate **foil** to contrast with his opponents. Paul could do this because he had one of the most dramatic conversions since he was a gold card member of the confidence in flesh club. It could be argued that there was no one living at the time who exemplified external qualities better than Paul, and he was known throughout the religious world for it. So Paul pointed to his own life to show that no amount of external action can save.

What Paul was born into

- **Circumcised** on the eighth day (literally an 'eighth-dayer) - this was the proper time frame given by God in Genesis 17:12 - his family kept the letter of this law
- **Nation of Israel** – he was not a proselyte, but was an Israelite by birth
- **Tribe of Benjamin** – first King Saul was from Benjamin; one of the most prestigious tribes; Benjamin was one of beloved sons of Jacob
- **Hebrew of Hebrews** – Paul knew the language, followed the customs, and carried out the orthodox traditions of the Jewish people; he had not been watered down by Hellenism

In other words, Paul was as pure of a Jew as anyone could be, and he had impeccable credentials since he had pure lineage.

What Paul chose

- **Living according to the Law** – devoted himself as a Pharisee; though they receive a bad name now, they were the elite when it came to knowledge and practice of the law; you didn't become a Pharisee if you were half-hearted about serving God; they stayed pure during the drift of the nation toward Hellenism
- **Living a zealous, passionate life for God and the Law** – Persecuted the church; He was **sincere & intense**, getting rid of any perceived enemy of his religion
- **Living righteously according to the Law** – Blameless; anyone who knew Paul would have seen him as an example of how to keep the moral law; they could go ahead and 'check the record in regards to how he lived

He was motivated, hard working, passionate, zealous, disciplined, righteous, good, and moral. He knew the Bible, taught it, and fought against those who attacked it. He gave his money, he participated in worship services, lead them, and sacrificed his time for others. He was sincere. He was who you hoped your daughter brought home as a potential husband. But Paul said he counted all of this as **loss, not only because it was no longer useful, but that it ALL WAS CONDEMNING!** All of this was worthless, because it was missing JESUS! He missed Christmas because he missed Christ!

Why Paul viewed this all as loss

Read Acts 26:12-26

- **Persecutor became persecuted** - Paul was a narcissistic abuser, not only punishing followers of Jesus but manipulating them to blaspheme, and in "raging fury against them" persecuted them even to foreign cities (Acts 26:10) - The gospel transforms completely, turning narcissists into humble, gentle, and honest people.
- **The intellectual became one who seemed crazy to others** (Acts 26:25)
- **The one who tried opposed Jesus was willing to die for Him** (Acts 26:9)
- **The one who tried to snuff out the church became the greatest champion of it** (26:16-18)
- **The one who did everything humanly possible to gain salvation saw it all as worthless by placing His trust in Jesus alone** (Philippians 3:7)

Note that Paul did not pray a prayer or even make a commitment, but God was the one who changed Paul and gave him a new heart. Paul followed in faith and obedience, but always pointed to the grace of God for his salvation (1 Cor. 15:10).

As we process our lives and hearts, especially at Christmastime, have you been trusting in your own self for salvation and change? When you are asked about where you are at in your life, do you point to yourself and your accomplishments, or Christ? Has your life as a believer been about performance or duty, box-checking and half-hearted worship, or a fully engaged heart that seeks to know, love, and follow Christ? God wants all of us, so He sent Christ to accomplish what we never could, so that we could have hope of a new heart, a new life, and new love. Next week we will look at what replaced Paul's fleshly existence with new hope: it was **knowing Christ Jesus his Lord**.