

Shalom and Sword

Introduction

Stealing Baby Jesus

PHOTO 1 Back in 1999 there was a big story in Chicago about how the baby Jesus figure had been stolen from the nativity scene at Daley Plaza. Eventually the police recovered the baby at a bus station after an anonymous tip. After that they started securing the baby Jesus figure with a cord and a bolt and a padlock to the manger to prevent anybody from stealing it again.

It didn't work, though, because in 2004 the same thing happened. This time it was a 19-year-old college student who was able to slip the baby out from underneath the cable. The law caught up with him after two days. They returned Jesus to the manger, and this guy got charged with some misdemeanor.

They upped the security measures once again. A team of people is now responsible for making sure that baby Jesus doesn't get stolen anymore from Daley Plaza. They're known as the God Squad, PHOTO 2 and they're very tightlipped about what security measures they've put in place. The goal of these guys is to make sure that Jesus never leaves the manger again.

Sadly many every year at Christmas try to keep Baby Jesus in the manger. You see you can't bolt down Jesus in the manger. In fact, you can't really understand the manger unless you consider the cross and resurrection.

When I prayed about this series, I really have the impression that God wants us to look at Why Jesus came rather than the typical Christmas stories of mangers, shepherds, wise men, and the details of the trip to Bethlehem.

Last week we introduced a key reason that Jesus came and I want to further explore that today.

Sword

I want to begin 2,700 years ago. The prophet Isaiah was writing 700 years before Jesus came, and he prophesies that when the Messiah comes, when this divine King is born, he will be the Prince of Peace. That's an amazing title when you consider that at the time Isaiah was writing, the monarchs were seen as those who brought war and destruction.

Then, if you know the Christmas story, you know that on the night Jesus was born there were shepherds out in their fields and the night sky was broken and shattered into a glorious light by angelic beings that filled the sky. They declared to the shepherds,

Luke 2:10–14 (ESV)

10 And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. 11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. 12 And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger."

13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, 14 "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

Peace on Earth...That's one of the most dominant themes of the Advent season. It's on Christmas cards. You see it posted everywhere: Peace on earth.

We think that Jesus came to establish peace, to be an end to conflict and strife, to make our lives more comfortable, more safe and secure. But is that accurate?

Certainly Scripture says Jesus is the Prince of Peace and he has come to establish peace. But could the establishment of peace actually call for a period of unrest?

In Matthew 10 Jesus says something that disrupts our assumptions about who he is and why he came. The chapter begins with Jesus selecting his 12 disciples, and then in verse 5 he sends them out on a mission to proclaim the kingdom of God throughout the villages and towns of Israel. He gives them specific instructions—to raise the dead and heal the sick and proclaim the Good News. Then in verse 26 he tells them that as they do this, they are going to be persecuted. People are going to hate them because of him.

Then in verse 34, Jesus says this:

Matthew 10:34–36 (ESV) 34 "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. 35 For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. 36 And a person's enemies will be those of his own household.

What are we to make of that? What happened to our Prince of Peace? What happened to "good will toward men"?

Jesus says he did not come to bring peace but a sword. This doesn't fit with our view of Jesus in the manger—the sweet, innocent, meek, and mild baby. This doesn't fit with our cultural view of Jesus the man, who is equally as infantile and sweet and gentle. How do we reconcile our view with the fact that Jesus says he has come to bring a sword? What does he mean?

First off, he's not speaking literally. Jesus is not literally wielding a sword. He never does, at least not anywhere in the Gospels. It's important to put this statement in the context of this chapter.

Earlier, starting in verse 5, when Jesus is giving instructions to his disciples as they go out, he tells them what they should bring with them. He says don't bring any money, don't even bring a bag to put anything in, don't bring an extra change of clothes, don't bring extra shoes, don't bring a walking stick, don't even bring any food. He certainly doesn't tell them to bring a sword.

So Jesus is not speaking literally here. He's using the sword as a metaphor, as a symbol. What does it represent?

In my opinion many have misinterpreted what Jesus meant when He said He brings a sword.....Most of us think of a sword as an instrument of violence. It's a weapon of warfare. Some people throughout Christian history have interpreted this verse to justify war against non-Christian cultures. Others have used it to justify Christians killing non-Christians in the name of God for self-defense or to protect the church in some way.

I think that's a misinterpretation of what Jesus is saying here. Nowhere in the Gospels does Jesus advocate violence. Jesus is not using the sword as an illustration of vengeance or violence or death in any way.

Remember, this is also the Jesus who told us to love our enemies, to pray for those who persecute us. He modeled that for us as he hung upon the cross when he prayed to forgive those who were in the process at that very moment of murdering him.

This is also the Jesus who told Peter to put away his sword, because those who live by the sword shall die by the sword. Jesus is not advocating violence. That's not what this symbol means. So what does it mean?

Well, we need to look to Scripture to interpret Scripture. When Paul told the Ephesians about putting on the armor of God....look at what he tells them.

Ephesians 6:16–17 (ESV) 16 In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; 17 and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God,

Hebrews 4:12 (ESV) 12 For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

The sword that Jesus brings is the truth of the Word of God. It is God's truth that divides people. It is God's truth that disrupts the peace of families.

In Scripture...both Jesus Himself and the Bible are called the Word of God. You may wonder, how can it be both...well it depends upon the context and the Hebrew or Greek Words used.

John 1:1–5 (ESV) 1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. 4 In him was life, and the life was the light of men. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

The term translated “Word” is logos, which basically means “the expression of a thought.” Logos can be thought of as the total message of God to man. It is the written word of God.

1 Thessalonians 2:13 (ESV) 13 And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers.

Logos the full and complete Word or Truth of God.....Jesus embodied that total message, and that is why He is called the “Logos,” or “Word,” of God. He is the fullness of God.....

Colossians 1:18–20 (ESV) 18 And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. 19 For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, 20 and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

Another word that is used for The Word is rhema. When Rhema is used, it is referring to the spoken word of God.

This is term Jesus used when tempted in the desert and the term used as the Sword of Armor that we just talked about.

Rhema is used to let the reader know that the power referenced is the spoken word. Logos refers to the Written Word and Christ.

So Jesus brings the truth of the Word of God and is the Truth of the Word of God....that truth is the Sword.....but to better understand this...we need to understand the meaning of another word...

Shalom

The key is in the word peace. Jesus says he has not come to bring peace. The word he uses here is the Hebrew word shalom, a word with nuanced meaning. It doesn't simply mean peace, as in the absence of violence. It's a peace that comes from wholeness, from being complete—completely put together, unified. It's the wholeness that comes when nothing is missing, when everything is one.

So what Jesus says is: I have not come to bring wholeness; I've come to bring the opposite. The opposite of wholeness or unity is division. He's using the image of a sword to mean to divide, to cut, to sever in half. "I did not come to bring peace, but a sword." I did not come to bring wholeness and unity, but division. This fits the context.

After all, in the verses immediately before this, Jesus is talking about how the disciples will go throughout the villages and will be persecuted and hated because of him. I've come to bring a sword, division.

What Jesus is saying is that his mission is to turn the world upside down, and we see him doing that even from the moment of his birth. When King Herod heard that the Messiah, the divine King, had been born in Bethlehem, Herod was greatly disturbed, because even as a baby, Jesus was a threat to his power. He'd come to turn the world upside down. So Herod tried to have this child killed.

Also, Mary and Joseph brought Jesus as an infant to the temple to be dedicated, as was the custom, and while there an old man named Simeon recognized that this baby was God's deliverer. While he was holding the child he said to Mary and Joseph, "This child is

destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel." In other words, this child is going to turn the world upside down. He is going to bring division.

This is the first thing we need to correct about our perception of Jesus during this season. At Christmas we don't celebrate the birth of a passive Savior, a pushover Messiah, somebody who just came to make us feel better.

Jesus is the most radical person who has ever walked the earth. He did not come to bring peace; he came to bring a sword, to turn the world upside down, to radically alter this world and to dethrone every illegitimate king. The way he did this was by calling all people back into communion with God, back into the kingdom of his Father.

He invited people who everyone else thought were completely disqualified from being connected to God: the sinners and tax collectors and prostitutes and thieves and drunkards and all those who were on the outskirts of society. He welcomed them back into communion with God. And he welcomes us back into communion with God.

He overturned the world by showing God's radical, lavish love for all people and then invited us to love God just as much, with our whole heart, mind, soul, and strength. The reason why this is threatening, the reason why this turns the world upside down, is because to be back in proper relationship with God, to love him with all that we are, means taking something else in our lives out of that place.

Every one of us has put something in the place that rightfully belongs to God alone. Just as Herod was threatened by the birth of this rival king, every one of us should be threatened by the birth of Christ, because he has come to dethrone whatever is on the throne of our lives that he alone has authority over. That's why he came to bring a sword; he's here to turn the world and our lives upside down

We think of peace as the absence of war between nations and that is what many people hoped and hope that the Messiah will bring....however, the conflict He came to address....is our battle with God.

We were all born as enemies of God. We are all born to naturally follow Satan. To worship ourselves.

The Bible uses the word "enemy" to describe a person's relationship with God before they give their lives to Christ. Romans says that "while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son" (Romans 5:10). Another verse describes people before salvation as "alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds" (Colossians 1:21). Before a person is saved, he is living in opposition to God—as an enemy of God—because he rejects or denies God's existence and His character as revealed in Scripture. The person's actions and goals directly oppose God's.

Even though our natural state is separate from God, God has never intended to leave us there. We do not need to remain enemies of God; God gives each person the choice of whether or not they want a relationship with Him.

Ephesians 2:1–9 puts it this way, "And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience ... and were by nature children of wrath ... But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast."

While Jesus offers everyone in the world this supernatural peace....not all find it....some will reject it....Look carefully at what the angels told the Shepherds....

Luke 2:13–14 (ESV) 13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, 14 "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

Peace among those with whom He is pleased...His peace is offered to all but comes to those who come to Him.

Ultimately, God will have victory over His enemies:

1 Corinthians 15:24–27 (ESV) 24 Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. 25 For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. 26 The last enemy to be destroyed is death.

In the end, Satan, the demons, people who chose to live in rebellion to God, and even death will be defeated by God. The enemies of God are no match for Him. After God defeats His enemies, His people will live free of pain and sorrow:

Revelation 21:4 (ESV) 4 He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."

Our battle with God is manifested in every area of our lives. Jesus however highlights two of them that we want to look at today.

First our relationship with our family and second our relationship with ourselves.

Jesus Versus Family

After introducing this radical idea of Shalom by Sword.....Finding peace with and in God's Word....., Jesus illustrates it in a few ways. First, he wants to show one thing that frequently occupies this

ultimate and high place in our lives other than God, one of the false kings that he wants to dethrone. To our surprise, especially at this season, it's family. Look what Jesus says in verse 35:

Matthew 10:35–39 (ESV) 35 For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. 36 And a person's enemies will be those of his own household. 37 Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.

This is pretty wild. What kind of person would be so bold, so outrageous as to step into another person's life and say, You have to love me more than your own children, more than your mother or your father? To be so bold you either have to be the Messiah, with the authority to demand that kind of allegiance, or you're a maniac.

In either case, this does not fit a suburban, family-friendly view of Jesus—certainly not the view of Jesus we like at the holidays, which are supposed to be all about family, right?

That's precisely the point. Jesus recognizes that in our estrangement from God, in our separation from him, we tend to put something else in God's rightful place in our lives, and sometimes we'll even exalt something that is good and wonderful like family and put it in a place that rightfully it should not be, a place reserved for God alone.

Now let me be clear. Jesus is not saying it's wrong to love our children or to be committed or love our parents. Family is not evil. The problem is when we exalt something or someone to a place that belongs to God alone.

Consider it this way. If there really is a God, and if he's the Creator of all things, if he created you and me, if everything in existence draws its life from God, and if he's eternal without beginning or end, if we are infinitely dependent upon him for our existence every moment, every second of our life, and if our connection to this God in one form or another will exist for eternity, then does it not follow that our relationship to this Creator should have supremacy above all other things?

What Jesus is trying to say here is: Do you recognize the supremacy of God over all things? The one who created your mother, your father, your son, your daughter deserves your allegiance more than they do. Do you recognize the supremacy of God over your life? Because those who do not are unworthy of God; they've given their allegiance to some lesser thing. Like everything else Jesus says in this passage, this is a counterintuitive, countercultural teaching.

I have spoken about this before, but when I was about 32 years old...the doctors thought that I likely had ALS. That diagnosis rocked my world. It sent me into a tail spin.

But that moment sent me into a time of reflection and depression for the next few years, a time of reevaluating my priorities and why I'm living and who I'm living for. Nothing clarifies your life more than death. Whether it's your imminent death or the death of someone close to you.

I started thinking about it was this way: I love my family. I am called to honor my parents. To love my wife as Christ loved the church and to care for my children. Those are non-negotiable. But who do I owe my allegiance to? The fact of the matter is, my dad is dead. Whether it's now or later, one day my mother will be dead. They're mortal. Same thing

could happen to my wife or kids....So who am I living my life for? Who should I live my life for? Ultimately my allegiance does not belong to my parents or my family. My allegiance belongs to the One who made me.

The irony is that today I have a better relationship with my parents, wife and children than I've ever had. Part of that is because I've learned to keep that relationship in its proper place. To not expect more from my parents than I ought, and to not give more to my parents than they're due. To give to God what is God's and to my wife's what is hers. That's can be a hard thing to do, but that's what Jesus is speaking of here. We are to be excellent children, husbands and parents...but only in submission to Christ....Jesus is using our most critical relationships to determine....Where does your allegiance lie?

Now let me bring a word of balance. This is not a green light to go to your family at Christmastime and start fighting with them and being belligerent about your faith or unnecessarily causing disunity. I don't recommend you pick a fight with people in your family who may disagree with you on minutiae of doctrine or even have different religious beliefs altogether. That's not what this is about.

Remember, Jesus is also the one who commands us to be at peace with all people as far as it depends on us. He's also the one who said if you are coming to worship and you realize your brother has something against you, go and be reconciled to your brother and then come and worship God. So Jesus isn't about causing family conflict just for the sake of conflict. But we still need to take Jesus' words seriously.

We live in a day when at least in the Christian community we talk a lot about family, marriage, and children. Part of that is because our culture is growing increasingly hostile to families, and we're reacting to it. Part of it is because the Scriptures have a lot to say about these core relationships.

Our obedience to Christ is often lived out in our closest relationships. So the tendency is to exalt family and make it the end all of the Christian life. We've got to be careful. Jesus Christ is not ultimately concerned with the unity and harmony of the family. His ultimate concern is that we live in unity and harmony with him. Family comes somewhere under that.

Let me give you an example....Before I was a pastor, it was at times tempting to miss church on Sundays or at the time we had a Saturday Night Church.

Attendance at Church would drop depending upon who was playing college football, if there was a parade in town, or some popular concert.

I decided that my families relationship with Christ took priority over everything else...We never scheduled anything on Saturday Nights because God came first.

One year, Alex played football and the game was delayed because of weather. I told the coach that if football ever interfered with church on Saturday nights that we would not be there.

This game was delayed....but when it came time for church....our family left and Alex walked off the field...because God came first.

What Jesus is teaching here is that family relationships are critical, but not as critical as our relationship and obedience to Christ.

The truth of God's Word will divide families...and I discovered youth football teams...Jesus is using the disruption of peace in the family to highlight the impact of a relationship with Him.

At some point, following Jesus will cost you relationships...even those closest to you.

Jesus Versus Self

After these radical statements about family, Jesus addresses a second thing we often put in the place that belongs to God alone, and that's ourselves.

Matthew 10:37–39 (ESV) 37 Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. 38 And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. 39 Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

Again, he's using a metaphor. This time it's a cross. A cross is a symbol of death, of execution. What he's saying here is that you must take up your cross. You must willingly sacrifice yourself, die to yourself, put aside your own desires, dreams, goals, and ambitions, and put Christ first, not yourself.

Self-denial is not a popular message. To die to self? We're Americans. We're all about self-achievement, self-betterment. But that's what Jesus says: "Anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me."

I mentioned at the beginning that the baby Jesus figure has been stolen from Daley Plaza a number of times. There's a Roman Catholic church in New York City where the Jesus figure has been stolen as well. But that one is a 200-pound plaster statue of Jesus. Thieves broke in and took it.

The interesting part was, being a Roman Catholic church, the Jesus was part of a crucifix. He was on a bigger cross. But they unbolted him from the cross and took him. The guy responsible for the artwork in the church was perplexed by this. He thought, Why would anybody only steal the Jesus and not the whole piece of art, the whole crucifix?

That's indicative of our culture, isn't it? We want Jesus; we don't want the cross. We want all the benefits of faith. We want the assurance and comfort and joy, but we don't want the other side. We don't want the self-sacrifice and suffering. We don't want the cross.

But that choice is not up to us. At the heart of Christianity is the paradox that Jesus speaks of here. He says that he who finds his life, who maintains his life, has control over his life, will, in fact, lose his life. We may throw God a bone every once in a while, but ultimately Jesus says it's not going to work.

It's just the opposite. It's the person who gives up her life, who surrenders herself completely to God, who keeps none of her dreams or hopes or desires for herself but gives it all, lays it down before God, who will find real life and life abundant.

It's a paradox. It's counterintuitive and certainly countercultural, like everything else in this passage. Give up my life and I'll find it? But you can't negotiate with this Jesus. You can't bargain with him. You can't say, How about this much, and I'll keep that? Remember, he didn't come to bring peace; he came to bring a sword.

Just as his birth was a threat to Herod, this illegitimate king, Jesus' presence is a threat to every illegitimate king over our lives, including ourselves. He has come to dethrone us so the King himself can reign over all. You don't negotiate with this King. You submit, or you reject.

Conclusion

Jesus is either a madman to make such a bold claim, or he is the Messiah, the one who alone can make this kind of demand. C. S. Lewis in his classic book *Mere Christianity* put it well:

"Christ says: Give me all. I don't want so much of your time and so much of your money and so much of your work. I want you. I've not come to torment your natural self but to kill it. No half measures are any good. I don't want to cut off a branch here and a branch there. I want to have the whole tree down. I don't want to drill the tooth or crown it or stop it but have it out. Hand over the whole natural self, all the desires that you think are innocent as well as the ones you think are wicked, the whole outfit. And I will give you a new self instead. In fact, I will give you Myself. My own will shall become yours."

This is why he has come—to turn the world, including our world, upside down, coming to demand full allegiance. There's an ancient hymn that some people think dates all the way back to the first century. This hymn speaks of why Jesus has come:

Let all mortal flesh keep silence And with fear and trembling stand. Ponder nothing earthly minded, For with blessing in his hand Christ our God to earth descends Our full homage to demand.

Jesus has come to ask for our full allegiance, and that will cause division both in us and in our world. During this season don't be fooled. Don't look at the manger and think only about this innocent, helpless, sweet baby, tender and mild, laying down his sweet head. Jesus is no such thing.

He did not come to bring peace but a sword. He did not come to make us feel better about ourselves, but to demand our allegiance. In fact, we learn to hate who we used to be...We kill the sin nature in us like the cancer that it is. Jesus came to turn everything upside down....To use a Sword, the Word of God, to bring Peace....Shalom with God.

He came as a threat to every illegitimate king in this world, including every illegitimate ruler in our own lives, whether that be family.....self..... or anything else. And he alone can make such a demand. He is the King...we surrender or resist...but He is still King.

No matter how cute Christmas is....you can't bolt baby Jesus...into a manger. You can't keep Him as a dependent helpless baby...You can only look at the manger and see the cross....He came with a destiny....This child came to restore our peace with God....to reestablish our relationship with our

creator....to systematically undo the damage that sin has done....He doesn't bring world peace...at least not yet...instead He brings the peace from God....Heavenly Peace on Earth.

John 14:27 (ESV) 27 Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.

You can't keep Jesus in the manger and you can't keep Him on the Cross....But you can keep Him first in everything...Let's Pray