

## It's Christmas

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Christmas is a strange event. If God were going to visit an imperfect world like ours, you would think that he would come with power and do something about hunger, untimely death, and poverty. If he is a righteous God, why doesn't he do something about evil and injustice? Is God really in control of his creation? Or have things become so messed up that terrorism, hatred and bitterness have the upper hand?

Christians say God came down to earth at Christmas, but if he really came why haven't things improved? He would seem to be a strange God if he has power to change things and doesn't, and he would seem to be a weak God if he cannot change what's wrong in the world.

One reason the Jews missed the coming of the Messiah that first Christmas is that they were looking for a powerful God who really would fix all that was wrong in the world. The idea of God being born in a stable as a baby of a peasant couple just didn't make sense. But does it really make much sense to us today? When you think about that first Christmas, it is a strange event.

So why did Jesus come gently that first Christmas? Why didn't he come with an army of angels to defeat evil and set up a heaven on earth? The answer is wrapped up in one word: love.

When God created humans he placed within us an emptiness for him. We were created to love God. If God had only created us to be good he could have created robots all programmed to do exactly what he wanted. But God wanted much more than goodness; God wanted to love us and for us to love him.

But love always has a risk. No one can love another unless they also have the power to hate the other. Without the freedom of choice there can be no love. Love cannot be bought, forced, or coerced. Love can only be given.

Suppose a child gives a Christmas gift to his mother and says, "I really didn't want to give this to you but father said if I didn't he would ground me for a week." The gift would have little meaning for the mother because love that is forced is not really love at all.

There is a fable that goes something like this. There was once a scientist who spent days and nights working in his lab. Although very successful in his vocation, he was very wanting in social skills. Eventually he wanted to marry but he had no idea how to attract a young lady. Then, one night in his lab, he created what many men dream of – a secret love potion that would make any woman fall madly for him. He soon met a charming young lady, convinced some friends to arrange for them to meet for dinner, and while she wasn't watching poured a few drops of the potion in her drink. Sure enough, the beautiful girl fell for him and they were soon married. Although she was completely devoted to him, he soon began to worry and fret. His appearance became haggard; he lost weight; he couldn't sleep. Instead of finding pleasure in his wife he didn't even want to touch her. Finally he was heard to mumble over and over, "But would she love me if I had not drugged her? Would she love me if I set her free?"

That is why Jesus came gently. If he had come with armies to defeat all injustice, or if he had come with healing angels to defeat all disease, or if he would have come with the treasures of heaven to make us all wealthy the whole world would follow him. But it wouldn't be love.

Jesus came gently that first Christmas to show us that God is love. Some people blame God for not solving their problems or healing their diseases. God has the power to intervene in our lives, and sometimes he chooses to in ways beyond our imaginations. But he cannot win our hearts by blessing us with health, treasures, or happiness. We have the freedom to love him, to ignore him, or to loath him. He will not take that freedom from us.

That is why being healed, gaining great wealth, and winning a legal judgment does not necessarily make people happy for long. Our emptiness is not for things or long life; our emptiness is for God. Without love for God life is an endless series of events that become meaningless at death.

So Christmas isn't so strange after all. God comes gently so that we can choose freely. It's unexpected. It's risky. It's unpredictable. It's love. It's Christmas.

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