

## Accomplishing Our Christmas Purpose



Gary Wilkerson December 1, 2014

When the Lord came to earth to dwell among us, he had a very specific purpose, one that was formed prior to the foundations of the world. Born in Bethlehem, Jesus came with the mission to teach us of the Father, to do mighty works, to rescue us from sin and to free us from all bondage.

That kind of Savior would naturally draw the attention of this world's ruling powers. Despite all the deadly obstacles thrown at him by man and by Satan, Jesus was able to accomplish his purpose. We see this dark opposition at the very outset of his story:

"Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the reign of King Herod. About that time some wise men from eastern lands arrived in Jerusalem, asking, 'Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star as it rose and we have come to worship him.' King Herod was deeply disturbed when he heard this, as was everyone in Jerusalem" (Matthew 2:1-3).

Israel's ruler, King Herod, immediately felt threatened. He understood that anyone identified as a "king of the Jews" was somebody the people would place their hopes in. That meant they would be turned off from the existing political system that kept Herod in power.

Yet Herod wasn't the only one disturbed: "...as was everyone in Jerusalem" (2:3). The people were threatened, too. Evidently they were satisfied with the dead, superficial religious system devised by their leaders. They preferred living in darkness to walking in the light, people who "act religious, but they will reject the power that could make them godly" (2 Timothy 3:5). It seems the whole world was disturbed by the idea of a Savior who had the majesty, glory and power to change people through his goodness. They were determined to stamp out every remnant and residue of the light of Christ's gospel.

We live in a world a lot like the one Jesus entered two millennia ago.

According to virtually every news source today, almost everyone in America is disturbed by the idea of a Savior like Jesus. In recent years school administrators, the national media and even the White House have reacted strongly – and negatively — to the public mention of Christ's name. This shouldn't surprise us, as Jesus foretold that as the day of his return draws near "the love of many will grow cold" (Matthew 24:12).

Still, for years Christians have been aware of what has been called the war on Christmas. Manger scenes have been removed from public spaces and schools no longer hold Christmas pageants, cultural moves that are reaching absurd heights. At a public school in the northeast, teachers recently took their students caroling but used substitute phrases for all references to Jesus. That's like throwing a birthday party for someone without acknowledging their presence at the event. It's all about cakes and hats while ignoring the person it's meant to celebrate!

Now the growing animosity toward Christmas has become personal. When I wished a stranger a "Merry Christmas" recently, I received a glowering stare in return. It worries me that I find myself tempted to offer a simple "Happy Holidays" instead.

Recently, when a national Christian children's hospital submitted a commercial to a TV sports network, the network refused to air it unless the hospital removed the name "Jesus" from the ad. There was also a controversy involving the patriarch on the popular *Duck Dynasty* TV show. People began calling for his firing because he said the Bible doesn't condone homosexuality. By merely quoting Scripture, he was called a bigot, a homophobe and a hate-monger.

I realize these persecutions are minor compared to those suffered by Christians in countries where Christianity is outlawed. In my visits to over sixty nations, I've seen the daily hardships that believers overseas endure. Yet I can assure you that very soon things will become worse for the church in America. Pastors in Houston have already risked criminal charges for refusing to submit their sermons to the mayor's office. She wanted to determine whether evangelical ministers were speaking against the pro gay bill she introduced.

This issue reaches all the way to the White House. A well-known evangelist was asked to offer the prayer at the 2012 Inauguration, but the invitation was rescinded when it was learned he had preached that homosexuality is a sin. It's as if our government is saying, "You're not welcome in our tolerant society. We'll tolerate everything except you stating your beliefs."

I'm not purposely trying to ruin your Christmas by writing about all these negative things.

Right now, amid the holiday frenzy, you may already have plenty of tension. So you might wonder, "Why bring all this up now? Why can't we just focus on being with family, exchanging gifts and seeing our children happy?"

I'm writing on this subject specifically because I'm convinced our children need to hear it. The issues I've mentioned have already encroached on elementary schools. Jesus makes it clear that hard times are coming, and the next faithful generation he's raising up is comprised of young people. I want them all to know, "As you see these things coming, you don't need to fear. The only thing you need to fear is *living in fear*—cowering and retreating from the glorious gospel that Jesus has equipped you to share with others."

The truth is persecution will always grow worse because the gospel keeps frustrating those who walk in darkness. God continually subverts their anti-Christ efforts, and that just makes them angrier. Thus John writes, "Let the one who is doing harm continue to do harm; let the one who is vile continue to be vile; let the one who is righteous continue to live righteously; let the one who is holy continue to be holy" (Revelation 22:11). John is prescribing our response to the world as it grows filthier and angrier toward us. His words echo those of Jesus: "God blesses those who are persecuted for doing right, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs" (Matthew 5:10).

I emphasize this because the church's response today seems to be the opposite. Very few among us seem willing to accept being persecuted without fighting back. Many believers want to retaliate politically, saying, "If you get angry because we say homosexuality is a sin, we'll just speak out louder. Our numbers will prove we're right." That attitude only builds more contention. And when it seems the church is losing ground, fear creeps in rather than faith.

I say to you, let Herod be furious—let the whole world be furious—but let your own heart be ruled by the love of Jesus Christ. All our power rests in his love. Indeed, the power of our witness is in preaching his Word with mercy, and in remaining holy amidst a corrupt generation. This witness will provoke those in darkness to turn to the light, saying, "I want the peace and joy those people seem to have in these troubling times. I want to know their God."

One of Satan's powerful temptations is to entangle Christians in a predominantly political mindset.

The devil isn't just making the world more furious at us. He's trying to make us as furious as the world is. He wants us to believe we can resist assaults of persecution rather than endure them for the gospel's sake. In the process, he seeks to replace our deep peace with contentiousness.

I admit I've fallen prey to this temptation. When I heard about what the sports network did, I composed an angry letter to them. Yet even as I wrote, I felt the peace of God's Spirit seeping out of me. I realized I had to revise it. Why? It wasn't because I'm afraid of the network; I'm not. What I fear is *losing the heart of Jesus*. This can happen to anyone who gives in to temptation to battle the world with worldly weapons.

I see this in some Christian newsletters I subscribe to. As they blast certain cultural forces, I experience the same loss of peace as when I wrote my own letter. At times it seems the church is involved in a chess match with the

secular world, moving pieces strategically with one goal in mind: *to win the culture war*. If we're not careful, our immersion in this war will drain us of all the salt and light Christ has given us to accomplish *his* Christmas purpose.

If anyone had a right to be outraged, it was Jesus. Think of the horrific genocide that took place in Israel when he was born. "A cry was heard in Ramah – weeping and great mourning" (Matthew 2:18). Jesus grew up in a culture where there were no boys his age because they had all been slaughtered. When Christ became a man he could have said, "Herod will pay for what he did. He killed all of my Jewish brothers, so now I'll bring him down."

Our Lord didn't do that. Instead, as a young man of thirty he set about proclaiming good news—healing the sick, performing miracles, even raising the dead. In short, he kept about his Father's business. Even when Herod Antipas sought to kill him, Jesus kept his focus. Some Pharisees warned him, "Get away from here if you want to live! Herod Antipas wants to kill you!" (Luke 13:31). Listen to Christ's profound reply: "Go tell that fox that I will keep on..." (13:32).

Jesus' use of "fox" here carries a cultural connotation. Foxes weren't seen as "sly" but as a deadly menace to sheep, chickens and livestock, coming to kill, steal and devour. Jesus identified Herod as just that kind of menace. Yet, even then he didn't do battle with the king. Instead, he added resolutely: "Yes, today, tomorrow and the next day I must proceed on my way" (13:33).

He was saying, in other words: "I will keep on doing exactly as I'm doing. I'll heal the sick, cast out demons and multiply loaves and fishes to feed the hungry. And I won't be distracted by persecution no matter how bad it gets. So go ahead and threaten me and the church that comes after me. I will keep on healing, saving and delivering—and my Word will triumph over all. I have come to fulfill my purpose to set every captive free."

May Jesus' Christmas purpose fill our hearts fully this season. Let the world careen on its dark path. That won't stop our powerful Savior from seeing his mission fulfilled. I've never heard of someone coming to Christ through a public manger scene, but I know scores who have been won through his love. May we keep to his purpose, which is our hopeful calling: "**There is liberty in Jesus Christ. Hallelujah! He has come to set you free!**"

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