

O Christmas Tree



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In a home with toddlers, the decorating of the Christmas tree can be an entertaining and sometimes frustrating event. In addition to the tangled tinsel and lumps of icicles, you can expect several broken ornaments and a tree that has ninety percent of its decorations on its bottom eighteen inches. This year we will be guiding our fourth two-year-old through this tradition. Is there a reason (besides temporary insanity) why we repeatedly place a child in the “terrible twos” in the same room with a teetering tree full of breakable lights and fragile ornaments? We call it “tradition.” But I believe we can add meaning to this ritual which will make it even more precious than perhaps it already is. We can use the Christmas tree as a seasonal object lesson to focus our attention on the Good News of Jesus Christ.

The Christmas tree can be a reminder that all of God’s creation is to worship and glorify Him. In the plant world, nothing stands as stately and beautiful as the trees. Artists and photographers the world over have for centuries been captivated by the wonder of trees. So often, the trees bridge the gap between the earth and the heavens above.

Years’ ago I spent a week in the Cascade mountains of north-central Washington. We hiked high into the range and camped in a valley surrounded by picturesque ponderosa pines. These evergreens seemed to form a natural cathedral with their tops pointing up beyond the mountains themselves to the Creator who gave them life. Those of us gathered there found ourselves inspired to worship God in like manner.

The thought that trees can bring glory to God is not really that far-fetched; the Bible states that *the trees of the forest will sing, they will sing for joy before the Lord* (1 Chronicles 16:33). And the prophet Isaiah proclaims *You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands* (Isaiah 55:12). Although we normally view this as figurative language, the truth is that even the inanimate can (and, I believe, **will**) praise God. When the crowd welcomed Jesus as *the king who comes in the name of the Lord*, Jesus said that if were they to be silenced, the stones themselves would cry out in recognition of Jesus as the King of kings (Luke 19:37-40). Indeed, everything that exists (whether it be rocks, trees or humans) has been created for the purpose of bringing glory to the Creator. This is the Plan of God. *For by [Jesus Christ] all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him* (Colossians 1:16). So learn a lesson from the Christmas tree: God would have each of us look up to Him in worship and praise as does this yuletide evergreen.

Second, the lighted Christmas tree can be a reminder that Jesus came to bring light to a world in darkness. The origins of the custom of the Christmas tree are now largely lost to antiquity. We are fairly certain the practice was begun in Germany in the early sixteenth century. Tradition has it that Martin Luther first brought in the conifer. The story is told that as he walked beside an evergreen one clear winter night, he was moved by the stars shining through its boughs. He brought a tree inside his room and decorated it with candles. As the years passed, this custom was continued and the lighted candles were said to be a welcome for the Christ child.

Even in the twentieth century where our nights are constantly lit by artificial light, the impact of a Christmas tree is most powerful in the context of a dark night. A similar contrast is seen in Jesus' coming into a world of spiritual darkness as the Light of the world (John 1:5). In Luke's account of Christmas, Simeon declares of Jesus, *My eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel* (Luke 2:30-32). Jesus Himself proclaimed, *I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life* (John 8:12).

Paul said, *We preach Jesus Christ as Lord. For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ* (2 Corinthians 4:5-6). What a beautiful object lesson is offered us in the lights of the Christmas tree!

Those lights dispel the cold darkness of winter nights and bring joy to the hearts of all. How much more does Jesus dispel the miserable darkness of sin and bring the joy of salvation to those who trust in Him!

Third, the Christmas tree can be a reminder that Jesus bore our sins on the tree of Calvary.

One of the tragedies of man's creative abilities is his tendency to take something good and fashion from it something evil. The sin of idolatry is such an example as man takes a precious metal created by God and forms it into an image which he then worships in rejection of the true God. Another example is found in the ancient Roman practice of crucifixion. Perhaps no other instrument of capital punishment has been so cruel and tortuous. It is somewhat ironic that what can be

so beautiful as a tree can be shortly transformed into something so brutal as a cross.

The tree of Calvary was more than just an instrument of torture. It was the fulfillment of a curse. In the Old Testament God had declared, *anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse* (Deuteronomy 21:23).

At first glance, this may seem to be a somewhat morbid thought to be attaching to such a happy season as Christmas, but in reality, this is grounds for rejoicing. Those who have surrendered themselves to Jesus will rejoice because *Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us* (Galatians 3:13). God has made provision for all to be forgiven for their sins, and this provision is inseparable from the tree, for Jesus *himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness* (1 Peter 2:24).

This theme is not only **appropriate** for Christmas, it is **inherent within the Christmas message**.

No greater gift was ever proffered than that which God gave when He sent His Son to die for your sins and mine. As the great hymn-writer Isaac Watts expressed it, *Was it for crimes that I have done He groaned upon that tree? Amazing pity! grace unknown! And love beyond degree!* The Christmas tree is beautiful, but we can view it as a reminder of the tree of Calvary whose beauty was not aesthetic but functional: on it our salvation was wrought!

Finally, the evergreen boughs of the Christmas tree can be a reminder of the eternal life God gives to all who put their faith in Jesus Christ.

As autumn falls so do the leaves of the deciduous trees. The vibrant green life of summer gives way to the gray lifelessness of winter. Come Christmas time, it is not the leafless dark branches of elms or oaks, but the colorful sweet-smelling pines and spruces we bring in to our homes. Why? Because they represent life that goes on regardless of the season. Whether it is a conifer tree or boughs of holly, the evergreen is the flora of choice; we see it in every home and business, and decking the halls of shopping malls. We are drawn to life!

Unfortunately, we too often fail to focus on what truly constitutes life. Within days after Christmas, the dying remains of our beautiful Christmas trees begin to show up in back yards and burning piles. What was on one day the center of our homes, the next day is nothing more than garbage. For many, Jesus is treated in similar fashion. Our manger scenes and Christmas songs are tucked away for another fifty weeks, along with any thoughts we may have had about the person of Jesus Christ who changed the world some two-thousand years ago. We fail to comprehend that this Jesus is ever-living. And this Jesus gives life that is everlasting.

Like the evergreen, there is no season during which Jesus is not alive and giving life. As Jesus himself proclaimed, *I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies* (John 11:25). And *I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me* (John 14:6). The message of the Christmas tree is that eternal life is available to all. But it requires a response on our part. We must come to Jesus in faith and obedience, not just

occasionally throughout the year on special days like Christmas and Easter, but daily! Then we, too, can have *evergreen-ness*, that is: a life which never ends.

The tree is a symbol of everlasting life in many passages of Scripture.... The Psalms open with a description of a righteous man who is *like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers* (Psalm 1:3). The last book of the Bible describes a tree in the middle of heaven which is the *tree of life* (Revelation 22). It is a desirable tree of beauty beyond description and the only ones who will be allowed to eat of its fruit are those who have put their faith in the Lord, who have been washed in the blood of Jesus Christ (Revelation 2:7; 22:2,14,19).

The evergreen Christmas tree should serve as a reminder of the everlasting life offered to all through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. We must never treat Him as a mere ornament of the Christmas season, but rather give Him first place in our hearts for eternity.

The Christmas tree has become an integral part of the holiday decorations in North America. For many, it is nothing more than an empty tradition; it serves only to provide a setting for the materialism of our culture. But this Christmas can be different. This Christmas let your tree present the message of Jesus Christ. And as you end this year and enter into a new year, let the Christ of Christmas be your Lord and Savior every day of this year and eternity.

