

“What If Jesus Had Never Been Born?”

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Isaiah 35:1-10, Luke 2:11, Mark 11:3-4

Listen to a beautiful passage from the book of Isaiah – another vision of a renewed earth when God comes to fulfill his purposes:

- 35** *The desert and the parched land will be glad;
the wilderness will rejoice and blossom.
Like the crocus,² it will burst into bloom;
it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy.
The glory of Lebanon will be given to it,
the splendor of Carmel and Sharon;
they will see the glory of the LORD,
the splendor of our God.*
- ³ *Strengthen the feeble hands,
steady the knees that give way;*
⁴ *say to those with fearful hearts,
“Be strong, do not fear;
your God will come,
he will come with vengeance;
with divine retribution
he will come to save you.”*
- ⁵ *Then will the eyes of the blind be opened
and the ears of the deaf unstopped.*
⁶ *Then will the lame leap like a deer,
and the mute tongue shout for joy.
Water will gush forth in the wilderness
and streams in the desert.*
⁷ *The burning sand will become a pool,
the thirsty ground bubbling springs.
In the haunts where jackals once lay,
grass and reeds and papyrus will grow.*
- ⁸ *And a highway will be there;
it will be called the Way of Holiness.
The unclean will not journey on it;
it will be for those who walk in that Way;
wicked fools will not go about on it.^a*
⁹ *No lion will be there,
nor will any ferocious beast get up on it;
they will not be found there.
But only the redeemed will walk there,
¹⁰ and the ransomed of the LORD will return.
They will enter Zion with singing;*

*everlasting joy will crown their heads.
Gladness and joy will overtake them,
and sorrow and sighing will flee away.¹*

What a magnificent vision! When God comes, there will be a revolutionary newness to things, a shifting from the status quo to a whole new order of life. Life will be profoundly changed for the better. When God comes, joy shall reign.

Today we celebrate the fact that God has come in the Person of Jesus:

Joy to the world! *“Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord...”* To us a child has been born who changes everything. He came as a great light in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it. The world is radically different because of the babe born in Bethlehem. Everything has indeed profoundly changed for the better.

Or has it? Sometimes in our cynicism, as we hear about another terrorist attempt to bring down on airliner (on Christmas Day no less) – as we continue to hear about crime, disease, destruction, brokenness and hostility, we may quickly conclude that nothing has changed. It’s the same old world – there’s nothing new under the sun.

At times we can identify with John’s disillusionment. John seemed to be impatient with the way Jesus was going about things. The Messiah didn’t seem to be swinging into action fast enough to defeat the forces of evil. Nothing seemed to be changing.

As he languished in prison, he sent some disciples to Jesus to ask him:

“Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?”

⁴ *Jesus replied, “Go back and report to John what you hear and see: ⁵ The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy^b are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.*

In other words, Jesus was saying. *“The vision of Isaiah is coming to pass. Look around you, John. You can see it. Change is happening. Lives are being transformed – one by one. Joy has come!”*

You don’t think much has changed since Jesus was born 2,000 years ago? We have only to look around. Jesus Christ has caused so many radically new and wonderful changes in our world that it staggers the imagination.

If you and I want to appreciate all the changes caused by the coming of Jesus, all we have to do is try to imagine what life would be like if he had never been born.

There is a powerful scene in the Christmas classic *“It’s A Wonderful Life”* where George Bailey is standing on a snow-covered iron bridge crying out in desperation, *“I want to live! I want to live*

¹ *The Holy Bible : New International Version.* 1996 (electronic ed.). Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

again!" He had just been given a "rare gift" – a look at life had he never been born. It wasn't a pretty sight.

Without George, Bedford Falls was Pottersville. Marked by loud music and garish flesh-peddling neon signs, that quaint upstate New York town had slid from Currier and Ives to Sodom and Gomorrah. All because George had never been born.

But what if Jesus had never been born?

There is an old Christmas story about a little boy on Christmas Eve who hurriedly checked his stocking by the mantle and the beautiful Christmas tree in the living room before going to bed. He was so very excited, but it seemed as if he had not been asleep for long when a rather harsh voice shouted, *"Get up."*

Remembering that it should be Christmas morning, the boy bounded out of bed, pulled on his clothes, and hurried downstairs. What a shock awaited him! No stocking hung from the mantel. There was no tree with presents beneath it. His parents were nowhere to be seen. Everything instead had a dull drab look about it. The little boy went to the door and was startled to hear the whistle from the local factory blowing its shrill call to work. *"What's the plant doing open on Christmas day?"* he wondered. Then he looked down the street. There were no wreaths on the doors, no bright lights in front of the homes. Instead all the shops were open for business as usual. He hurried towards the center of town. *"Why are all the stores open on Christmas?"* he asked a woman he passed on the street. *"Christmas,"* she muttered, *"I've never heard of it!"* Everywhere it was the same. People hurried by and no one even stopped to greet the now fearful boy.

Suddenly, he knew there was one place he could go where people knew about Christmas--his **church!** The boy and his family always went to the Christmas Day service in the little church. He hurried as fast as he could along the street, but when he came to where the church should have stood, there was only a vacant lot filled with tall weeds and debris. He thought of his **school**, but when he ran to the corner where it had stood, there was another vacant lot! The same he soon discovered was true of where the **town library** he loved had once stood and the **YMCA** where he played basketball.

It was then that the sorrowful boy heard a low moan. Looking down, he saw a man lying on the snow, obviously hurt. *"A car hit me an hour ago."* stammered the man, *"and no one will help me! Please get some help!"* In desperation the boy decided he could run to the **hospital** just a few blocks away and get help. But even as he reached the street where Good Samaritan Hospital had stood, he began to see another vacant lot, this time with an ugly concrete wall around it. **No hospital! No church! No school! No Christmas!**

In an agony of spirit the little boy stumbled toward his home. The previous night his father had read from the family **Bible** the wonderful story of the Savior's birth. As he entered the house, there was the Bible still by his father's chair in the living room. He opened it eagerly, but where the New Testament should have been, there was only a series of empty pages. Across one of the pages, someone had written the words, *'If Only Jesus Christ Had Come.'* The boy raced upstairs and flung himself on his bed, crying softly for a world that simply was no more.

Then he heard his mother's voice saying excitedly, *"Bobby get up, It's Christmas morning!"* The boy sprang up from his bed and ran to the window. Out there on the houses were the beautiful wreaths! Brightly lit Christmas trees could be seen up and down the street, and as he listened, he heard the chimes playing from the church bell tower, *"Joy to the World, The Lord Has Come."* *"You did come,"* he whispered, *"thank Jesus for coming to our world!"*

Think for a few moments of the things that are different because God once came into our world in Jesus Christ.

- No longer, for instance, are women regarded as mere property - men's possessions without a soul of their own. Jesus changed all that by showing a graciousness and esteem to women unknown in the world before he came.
- No longer are children maltreated as of old, or babies cast out to die. Children became precious when he said, *"Let the little ones come to me, for of such is the kingdom of God."*
- No longer is it accepted that some human beings are born to be slaves and others to be masters, since Jesus died for all to deliver us from the bondage of sin. No longer are some races regarded as inferior to others, because the Christ says we are all one in him and calls us to *"love one another as I have loved you."*
- Human life took on a new dignity and worth when he told us, *"The very hairs of your head are numbered."*
- Jesus lifted family life to new and glorious heights when he exalted purity and faithfulness within the marriage bond.
- He stimulated learning to new purpose and depth when he promised, *"You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."*
- Labor is no longer scorned as something lowly since he became the carpenter of Nazareth and the servant of all.
- Hospitals and homes for the elderly, playgrounds and libraries, and institutions dedicated to public service all draw their being from the source of his compassion and concern.
- The powerful and noble concepts that motivate our lives at their best, freedom and peace, decency and kindness, forgiveness and love, all these we have drawn from Emmanuel.

Of course, all these things did not happen at once, and much remains to be realized in our world as Christ continues to challenge us over the problems of war and race, economic injustice.... But we must never forget that the One who began life as a baby in Bethlehem is the one who has changed all things!"

Jesus, the greatest person who ever lived, has changed virtually every aspect of human life. Much of what we take for granted – our high regard for human life, the elevation of women, education, science, charity, hospitals, the idea of social reform, the abolition of slavery, representative government, literacy, and the development of art and music – all find their roots in Christ and His teachings.

Kenneth Scott Latourette, the distinguished Yale historian, once wrote, *“Measured by its fruits in the human race, that short life of Jesus has been the most influential ever lived on this planet. Gauged by the consequences which have followed his life, Jesus of Nazareth is central in the human story and the most important event in the history of the world.”*

Even more remarkable than the outward changes in society are the internal changes – the heart changes – made possible by the coming of Emmanuel.

Think of all the people down through the centuries whom the Lord has touched and changed for the better. There are countless witnesses to his transforming power.

Think of the Jesus’ first followers and the change that came to them under his influence.

A church school teacher was talking to her first grade church school class about the first men Jesus called to be his followers.

Reviewing the lesson, she asked the children what these first followers were called.

There was a long pause, then one child eagerly raised his hand: *“The recycles!”* he exclaimed.

That’s the truth! If they were disciples, they were also the “recycles”: uneducated fishermen, hated tax collectors, feared persecutors of the Christian community were recycled into dedicated, useful servants of God because “they had been with Jesus.”

Jesus our Emmanuel continues to do the same today. He “recycles” -- transforms men and women, boys and girls into his disciples, changing their lives for the better, filling them with love, joy, peace like they had never known before.

So many have discovered in the Babe of Bethlehem just how much God loves them, and with God’s help, how much of life can be changed.

I think of one alcoholic who cried out to Christ in desperation. He asked the Lord to save his soul from sin and to rescue him from his addiction. He became a Christian, and by the power of Christ he stopped drinking.

His old friends at the bar dismissed his conversion as a passing phase. *“Give him a month,”* they said, *“and he’ll be back on the bottle.”*

But a month went by and he hadn’t touched a drop. So they tried to mock him out of his new faith. *“Do you believe that part of the Bible where Jesus turned the water into wine?”*

“Indeed I do,” he replied.

“Would you ask Him to do that for us? It would be nice of Him to oblige us. Or do you think that was just something made up about Him to get the likes of you converted?”

The man responded, *“I do believe Jesus turned water into wine. In fact, He did better than that for me. He turned beer into furniture and food. Just ask my family.”*

If Jesus had never been born, such remarkable transformation in human nature would never have been possible. Indeed, we would still be lost in our sins.

The question is, has our journey to the manger this year changed you and me? Do we have a new hope, a new joy, and new motivation to reflect his glory and love in our lives?

Think of the changes that came to the shepherds and to the wise men after visiting the manger. The shepherds returned, says Luke, “glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen”. They left the manger different people, filled with joy, a new motivation for their lives. The wise men, having left their gifts at the manger and worshiped him, left as different people as well, a new wisdom and a new teaching to give their lives new purpose and meaning.

The One who changes all things can change you and me for the best, if we will open our hearts to meet him.

*O holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray,
Cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell;
O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel.”*