

“Operation Bethlehem Baby: Hot Wash-Up” (Ephesians 1:3–14)(12.27.20)

Ephesians 1:3–14 (NIV84)

³ Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. ⁴ For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love ⁵ he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will— ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. ⁷ In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace ⁸ that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding. ⁹ **And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, ¹⁰ to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment—to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.**

¹¹ In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, ¹² in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. ¹³ And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, ¹⁴ who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession—to the praise of his glory.

The word of God for the people of God.

Title: **“Operation Bethlehem Baby Hot Wash-Up”**

LET US PRAY.

INTRODUCTION:

What is a “Hot Wash-up”? It is a common term in the military. After a large scale operation, or a campaign, or an exercise, representatives from all the units involved and the decision makers gather to review what happened. First, the initial goals are laid out. Then everything that happened is evaluated to determine how those goals were met or missed.

In the Coast Guard, there would sometimes be a Hot Wash-up after a large scale search and rescue case. There might be small boats, various size cutters, a variety of aviation assets, and several command and communication centers. Likely there would be other agencies involved, maybe maritime police, commercial vessels, or foreign nations.

God becoming man in the person of infant Jesus, was the biggest rescue operation of all time. There were literally players from heaven and earth. It was a rescue operation of cosmic proportions. The military likes to give special names to special operations. I have named this rescue effort Operation Bethlehem Baby.

Scripture tells us that God had several goals connected to the incarnation. In today’s text, we are told that Jesus came that we may have redemption through his blood. More globally, the purpose of the Messiah was to bring all things in heaven and earth together under one head, even Christ. The archangel Gabriel told Joseph that Jesus would save people from their sins. The angel announced to the shepherds, “I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.” The heavenly host sang out, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.”

Isaiah prophesied about the coming Messiah: Isaiah 9:6 (NIV84)

For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.

And he will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

So, my intent now is to evaluate how Operation Bethlehem Baby met the recorded goals of God.

BODY:

The purpose of a Hot Wash-up is not to assign blame. It is to identify weaknesses and vulnerabilities. What did we do well and what could be done better? Were there communication complications? Maybe our equipment needs updating. We need to identify ways to improve our coordination, our timing. Time. Yes time is an issue. Certainly, God's timing and our perception of time are completely different. The Apostle Peter reminds us, 2 Peter 3:8 (NIV84) "But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day." Peter was addressing concerns about the delay in Jesus' second coming. The Apostle Paul, also wrote to the churches because many Christians in the early Church were concerned about the delay in Jesus' return. They looked around their world and they thought surely Jesus' return was imminent. The Messiah's first coming had not panned out the way most of Israel had expected. The early church celebrated Christ's victory of sin and death through His crucifixion and resurrection. And yet, they suffered great persecution.

Jesus had taught, blessed are those that are persecuted for my sake. Paul taught that suffering was part of the Christian walk. It is part of the sanctification process and that we should actually rejoice in suffering. Peter said over and over again that there was a direct connection between suffering and the glory to come. The Book of Hebrews repeatedly tells us to endure in the faith, to not fall away, to hold fast to our confession and hope.

And here we are two thousand years later, and Jesus still has not returned. What is going on? In many places in the world, in the Middle East, in Africa, in Asia, Christians are being persecuted and even killed for the confession of Jesus as Savior. Where is the Prince of Peace? Where is the government that Jesus will bear on His shoulders?

Yes, God's timing is problematic for us. The incarnation, Immanuel, God with us, is Jesus breaking through the barrier of time. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. God was before time and is outside of time. All of time is held in view of God at once. It is hard for us to perceive this concept. Every frame in the film of time can be seen by God in a glance.

We are told that things happened before time. God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world. We were redeemed by the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. He was chosen before creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake. Followers of Jesus have had their name written in the Book of life from the creation of the world. The Father loved the Son before the foundation of the world. God's saving grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus. And yet, his work has been finished since the creation of the world.

Our NIV translation tells us that Jesus' purpose was to bring all things together under Him. It is also translated as uniting all things in Him; or summing up all things in Christ; or gathering all things together in Him.

Now, I will come back to the purpose in a minute, but when is this supposed to happen? When the times will have reached their fulfillment; at the fullness of time; at the fullness of the times; or in the dispensation of the fullness of times. But when is that?

Paul tells us in Galatians 4:4-5 (ESV)

⁴ But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law,
⁵ to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.

Is there a problem with our communication channels in regard Operation Bethlehem Baby? The problem is in our finite capabilities living in time to comprehend an infinite God who is outside of time.

To make it a little clearer, let us look at what happens when baby Jesus is brought to the Temple.

Simeon had been told by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he has seen the Lord's

Christ. When Joseph and Mary brought Jesus, Simeon took him in his arms. Simeon said, "Lord, my eyes

have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples.” By seeing Jesus, he had seen salvation. They are one and the same and the time element is not considered.

So, have the goals of Operation Bethlehem Baby been accomplished. In a sense yes, but they have not become fully realized. How do we respond to this reality? How do we communicate to other people the truth of the gospel that seems on the surface to be obscured?

This Christmas morning people woke up to find out that there was a large explosion and fire in downtown Nashville. Does that sound like the Prince of Peace is on the throne? Does that sound like a world where the government is on the shoulders of the Savior? There is no peace on earth. Where is the joy? How is God being glorified? Where is God in this?

On television, they have started a review of 2020 like they do every year after Christmas. Most everyone agrees that it has been the most challenging year in many decades. Division and divisiveness seem at an all-time high. There has been a lot of racial tension and civil unrest. Then we have the COVID-19 pandemic. There are not only the medical issues and death because of the virus. There has been a catastrophic effect on the economy. There has been abuse of governmental power. There are many implications for the resulting social isolation.

Sin caused scattering while Christ brings gathering. From the very beginning of the human race this holds true: **Sin caused scattering while Christ brings gathering.** Adam and Eve were disobedient and were cast out of the idyllic Garden of Eden and blessed communion with God. Cain kills Abel and God punished Cain by making him a wanderer of the earth. The human race determined to find their own way back to heaven and built the Tower of Babel. The Lord confused their language and dispersed them over the face of all the earth. Scattering is punishment and gathering is redemption.

It appears that the scattering, the dividing, the isolating is still happening. Why? Because sin is rampant. The evidence surrounds us. Did Operation Bethlehem Baby fail? Or have we, the Church failed? Salvation has come, but it has not come to completion.

There is another obstacle hindering our Hot Wash-up. We know very little about what is going on in the heavenly realm and the spiritual sphere. We know that Lucifer and a 1/3 of the angels were cast out of heaven. We know that demonic activity affects human beings. The Book of Daniel speaks about the Archangel Michael battling “the prince of the kingdom of Persia.” We also know that the Book of Revelation has a lot to say about cosmic battles.

In Christ Jesus, through whom all things were made and held together, they were in fact made for Him. He is the King of kings and Lord of lords. At the right hand of God the Father, all things have been placed under the Son’s authority. So, we should not be surprised that His primary purpose in coming is to gather all things of heaven and earth unto himself.

As the scriptures teach, Jesus is the WAY connecting heaven and earth. John 1:51 (NIV84) He then added, “I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.” Jesus entered time ushered in by the heavenly host singing alleluia. He was ministered to by angels after his temptation by Satan. He was ministered to by angels in the Garden of Gethsemane. He told the disciples that there were always twelve legions of angels at his disposal. There were angels to greet the women at the empty tomb. There were angels at Jesus’ ascension into heaven on the clouds. AND, when Jesus returns on the clouds it will be with His angels and a loud trumpet blast. At the time, the dead in Christ will rise first and the Church of Christ will be raptured.

CONCLUSION:

A.W. Tozer wrote in his devotional for December 23rd:

Christmas Is Real Great is the mystery ... God was manifest in the flesh. (1 Timothy 3:16)

The birth of Christ was a divine declaration, an eternal statement to a race of fallen men and women.

The Advent of Christ clearly established:

First, that God is real. The heavens were opened and another world than this came into view.

Second, that human life is essentially spiritual. With the emergence into human flesh of the Eternal Word of the Father, the fact of man's divine origin is confirmed.

Third, that God indeed had spoken by the prophets. The coming of the Messiah-Savior into the world confirmed the veracity of the Old Testament Scripture.

Fourth, that man is lost but not abandoned. Had men not been lost no Savior would have been required. Had they been abandoned no Savior would have come.

Finally, that this world is not the end. We are made for two worlds and as surely as we now inhabit the one we shall also inhabit the other!

In the Coast Guard we had a database to collect information from ALL the Hot Wash-ups. Because we love acronyms in the military we called it CGULLS. Not the bird; it stood for Coast Guard Universal Lessons Learned. Today, I tell you that Operation Bethlehem Baby was a success. To understand this we must expand our understanding of time. To communicate this effectively to others, we must expand our knowledge of the scriptures.

A great wind started on this past Christmas Eve and continued throughout the night. On Christmas morning a trampoline was found in the cemetery at the Absecon United Methodist Church. On social media, I joked that maybe people were trying to bounce into heaven. It is my prayer for a great wind of the Holy Spirit to blow across our land. It is my prayer for revival to come.

Jesus taught about the end of this age: Matthew 24:12–14 (NIV84)

¹² "Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, ¹³ but he who stands firm to the end will be saved. ¹⁴ And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come."

When you turn to the last page of your Bible and you put your finger on the last two verses, you read, "Revelation 22:20–21 (ESV) ²⁰ He who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming soon." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

²¹ The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all. Amen.

Let us pray.