

PARADOXOLOGY

Why Is It Good That Christmas Is Complicated?

Text: John 1:1-18

Living Doxologically

Most of us want to believe what the writer of Ecclesiastes once wrote in chapter 3 of his book: that **“there is a time for every purpose under heaven”** and that **“[God] makes everything beautiful in its time.”**¹ Like a child on Christmas morning, we want to trust that there’s a wonderfully good and wise parent at work who knows what we really want and need and has the power to deliver it. We’ve heard that scripture from Romans 8 where Paul says that **“God works all things together for the good for those who love him.”**² So, even if that gift for which we’ve been longing isn’t in sight yet, we still want to trust that beneath the tree someplace is God’s grace, eventually to be discovered.

For millennia now, faithful Jews and Christians have approached life with this persevering sense of hope. One of the ways they have expressed this faith is through the writing and singing of short songs that came to be known as “Doxologies.” The word doxology is a contraction of two Greek words—“doxa” meaning “glory” or “praise,” and “logos” meaning “word.” A doxology is a “word of praise or glory” given to God. It’s a brief statement of confidence in God’s character and purposes. It’s a short song of praise for God’s blessings—the blessings we’ve seen thus far and those we’ll yet see. The Old Testament—and especially the Book of Psalms—is jammed with of doxologies.³ Doxologies also occur at or near the end of numerous New Testament books. If you want to read some of them, I’ve footnoted twenty of these in my manuscript for today.⁴

But most of you have sung a doxology yourself. How many of you have ever sung at Christmas time: “Gloria in excelsis deo”? Those words have been traditionally known as the “Greater Doxology.” They are a direct quotation of the words of the angels to the shepherds in Luke 2: **“Glory to God in the highest.”**⁵ How many of you have ever sung what tradition calls “the Lesser Doxology” or the “Gloria Patri”—“*Glory be to the Father...*”? I bet almost all of us have sung or heard what Christians simply call THE Doxology.

One of the clearest signs that we are maturing in our faith and Christian character is that we will live, more and more, “doxologically.” That is, like the angels of heaven and all of the other characters we meet around the manger at Christmas, we are going to live more and more of our lives in view of God’s glory. We’re going to be aware of and trusting in God’s provision and plan. We’re going to be regularly speaking words of praise and thanksgiving to God for who He is, for what He has done, and for what He will yet do. We’re going to be humble in the face of mastery, and persevering in the face of misery, and trusting in the face of mystery, because we live doxologically. The

glory of who God is, our praise for what He's done, and our confidence in what He will yet do shapes our experience of life.

What Do You See Under the Tree?

The challenge is getting to this state of peace and praise. It is a whole lot easier to get stuck looking beneath life's tree and thinking to ourselves: "What's wrong with this picture? Why am I not getting what I wanted, what I scripted, what I expected?" The waiting or the worshipping becomes harder still because most of us grow up with this idea that the truly good gifts of life *should* be a bit more visible, predictable, and controllable. That's because, in a million subtle and overt ways, we're taught that there's supposed to be this "normal" story line to life.

We're supposed to grow up healthy in a healthy family. We're supposed to have this little period of rebelling against authority figures and then fall back in line again. We're supposed to get a good education that helps us get a good job. We're supposed to do the whole *Friends* thing for awhile and then comes love, then comes marriage, then comes that cherub in the baby carriage. And so we go on to raise our own happy family. We steadily climb the career and community ladder as more and more of our life just unwraps... beautifully... in its time.

We're increasingly respected by everybody around for what a person of stability and stature we've become. Our kids are successful in their own right. We get on famously with our co-workers. Our income grows, the vacations become nicer, the portfolio grows fatter; and then one day we start working a lot less and basking in the sun a lot more and we're free to love up on those flawless grandchildren at every opportunity. We spend our later years grinning proudly at our longtime spouse or our remarkably well-preserved friends. We feel really blessed.

If that's your life story, then I hope you're singing: "Glory be to God in the highest!" Because what you've experienced is so statistically and sociologically unusual that only divine intervention can fully account for it! But if that is NOT EXACTLY your story, as it is not exactly mine... if instead, you've faced serious loss or illness along life's way and this still troubles you... if you've failed someplace mightily or are stuck someplace today... if you're a kid desperately struggling with your parents or a parent deeply worried about a child of any age... if your love life or your work life or your financial life is very difficult right now... if you've almost given up hope that there is a God who might still bless you or other people through you, then here's my invitation: Get down on your knees with me; part the branches of God's Word with me; because I think I see back there a GIFT, and it is for YOU and me.

The Mess of Christmas

Now, please listen closely because this is important: This gift comes in the form of a major theological truth found in our lesson from John's gospel today. And here it is: God's M.O.—his pattern of working—is to reveal himself in paradox, in the midst of

apparently contradictory realities. In fact, the word paradox literally means “alongside glory.” The apostle John tells us in verse 14, **“We have seen [God’s] glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth”**—full of so much good. But elsewhere in the passage, John makes it clear that this glorious blessing was wrapped up in packaging that did not look so good at all.

We met a man made of **“flesh,”** John reports. The Greek word for “flesh” there in verse 14 is “sarx.” Sarx is not a particularly sentimental word. It means muscle, sinew, meat. Flesh is the material that some animals tear off and eat. Flesh is what sags and grows weak as we age. Flesh is the stuff that gathers grime and breaks down and rots away. But in the midst of that “sarx,” says John, dwelt the “logos.” The Greek term “logos” is translated here as **“the Word.”** To the Greeks, the “logos” was the supreme rational mind that conceived of the Universe and brought it forth and held it all together. To the Jews, the “logos” was the voice of God that spoke reality into being at the beginning of all things, and communicated God’s nature and will. Whether you were a Greek or a Jew, the last place you’d ever expect to find the eternally awesome Logos was inside a box of sarx. And yet, says John, that’s exactly what we found. **“The word became flesh.”** Glory was wrapped in grime.

It was like this, says John and the other apostles. There were so many apparent contradictions, so many strange confluences when it came to how God worked for the good. He met light surrounded by the darkness. **“The light shone in the darkness, but the darkness didn’t understand it.”** We encountered perfect love and wisdom surrounded by rejection and stupidity. **“He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.”**

John is saying, in effect, if you want to meet God... if you want to see what he’s doing or hear what he has to say to you... if you wish to get alongside his glory, then don’t just look for him in the parts of your life or others’ lives that are neat and tidy; look for Him in the areas that are complicated, maybe chaotic, or confusing. An unwanted pregnancy, an uninvited journey, a stable when you wanted an inn, might just be the place, the wrappings in which the glory of God comes to you. It may be in conflict... that God gives you the light to see your own need of forgiveness. It may be in the midst of... (expand further).

The Miracle of Christmas

Beneath the tree at Christmas is the gift of disturbing PARADOX. We are reminded that the gifts of God often seem strange at first. They come in wrappings which are confusing or which belie their true contents. Yet, when received by faith, these gifts show themselves to be the greatest of all.

Thomas Long, a professor of mine at Princeton Seminary, put it this way: “To affirm the Incarnation does not imply that life is rosy or that people always do the right thing or even the best they can. It does not mean that people do not waste their lives, get hurt,

or hurt other people. It does not mean that there is no hardship, no drudgery, no evil, no tragedy. It would be an illusion to pretend otherwise. What it does mean is that there is no corner of experience so hidden that grace cannot find it. There is no soil so sterile that the seed of holy wonder cannot grow in it. There is no moment so dark that it can extinguish the light of God which even now shines in it. Christians do not bubble around celebrating life. They celebrate God who enters the life of creation in order to redeem it.”⁶

For the Word became flesh, in order to dwell amongst us. And if we look closely, if we wait patiently, we can still receive his glory, full of grace and truth. For which we sing...
“Praise God from whom all blessings flow, Praise God all creatures here below. Praise God above ye heavenly host, Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.” Amen.

Reflection Questions

1. Where do you experience contradictions or confusion during the Christmas season?
2. To what extent do you keep returning to Christmas, expecting these tensions to resolve themselves?
3. How have you ever experienced a good gift wrapped up as something which did not look so good at the start?
4. Where might there be something in your life right now which seems a groaner but is actually a gift?

¹ Ecclesiastes 3:1, 11

² Romans 8:28

³ Exodus 15:18; Psalms 41:13; 72:19; 89:52; 106:48; 146:10; 150:1

⁴ Romans 16:27; Philippians 4:20; 1 Timothy 6:16; 2 Timothy 4:18; Hebrews 13:21; 1 Peter 5:11; 2 Peter 3:18; Jude 1:25; Revelation 1:6; Revelation 4:8; Revelation 5:13; Revelation 7:12.

⁵ Luke 2:14

⁶ Thomas Long, *Shepherds and Bathrobes*, p.56.