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Christmas 2015

Selected Scriptures

The measure of a true gift is not so much its value but its cost. If I gave you a diamond ring for Christmas, you might be moved by my generosity unless of course I owned a huge jewelry store and I just grabbed one off the shelf. The ring itself may be valuable but if its cost to me was negligible, then its value as a gift is negligible as well. Measured by that standard, there is no gift more costly than the incarnation of Jesus Christ. He didn't just pull a diamond ring off the shelf, he gave us a gift that cost him dearly. The Bible tells us Jesus emptied himself. In *Philippians 2:5-7*, it says this, it says: *Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.* *Philippians* tells us that Jesus emptied himself, but it doesn't go into detail of just what he emptied himself of. But the answer to what that was can be found in the passage that I usually end our message with. I use *Jude 25* as our dismissal blessing and the last part of that blessing says this: *To God our*

Savior, who alone is wise, be glory and majesty, dominion and power
-- I certainly hope you know that by now -- *both now and forever.*
Amen. Now this is a blessing that says may God, may God our Savior
receive those four things that rightfully belong to him. Well,
those four qualities were part of the cost of Christmas that God
gave up when he entered into flesh and blood, humanity. You know,
we've been raised to see Christmas in a highly romanticized way and
it may well have taken place in a little town of Bethlehem and the
little Lord Jesus may well have been asleep on the hay, but the
fact is, the birth of Jesus Christ was rude and brutal and ugly.
And there was certainly no glory, no majesty, no dominion and no
power at all in that barn that night. Jesus had emptied himself in
order to enter into life the same way we enter into it. He set
aside it all in order to fully embrace our humanity. And the first
great sacrifice I want to look at this morning is glory.

John Piper gives us a good definition of what "glory" is. He says
this, he says: "The glory of God is the beauty and excellence of
His manifold perfections. It is an attempt to put into words what
God is like in His magnificence and purity. It refers to His
infinite and overflowing fullness of all that is good. The term
might focus on His different attributes from time to time -- like
His power and wisdom and mercy and justice -- because each one is
indeed awesome and beautiful in its magnitude and quality. But in

general God's glory is the perfect harmony of all his attributes into one infinitely beautiful and personal being."

You know, if you take every single thing that touches your soul with its goodness or beauty, something like a sunset or a mountaintop and you magnify it to its ultimate perfection in every expression of its being, you get a hint of what it's like to be filled with the glory like God is. I mean we can't begin to imagine what that's like because that is so foreign to our fallen state of being. A sunset or a mountaintop is a vague hint at something far, far grander that lies outside of our ability to grasp. And yet each one of us has within us this secret longing to experience that glory. God is that glory. We sense it in the mountaintop and the sunset and they are hints of a glory that emanates from God itself. And it is a glory so intense, so altogether foreign to who we are that to fully experience that glory would kill you.

Moses in the Old Testament once said to God himself in *Exodus 33:18*, he said: *"Please, show me Your glory."* God said in verse 19: *"I will make all My goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim the name of the LORD before you. I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion."* But he said, *"You cannot see My face; for no man*

shall see Me, and live." And God told Moses that his longing to experience the glory of a face-to-face encounter with God would be ultimately fatal. He said that because mankind and God are now that different. But we know it was not always the case, I mean, when God created Adam and Eve they walked and they talked and they had fellowship with God himself because they, too, were perfect like he was. And when Adam and Eve decided to commit treason by doing the one thing that God had forbidden them to do, they forfeited the very nature of perfection and then they passed on that imperfection to every one of their children including you and me. The simple act of disobedience so fundamentally changed their very makeup and nature that God now actually had to protect Moses from fully experiencing his presence. And God knew that the only way for men and women to recapture that perfection was for God himself to become one of us and to live the life we were supposed to live and then offer up that perfect life as a substitutionary sacrifice for you and me. But in order to do that, God first had to give up his glory. And so he chose to do that first by overshadowing a peasant virgin named Mary. And we all know the story of Mary and Joseph, we know the story that there was no room in the Inn and we know that God chose to enter into human flesh not in a palace or in a mansion but in the filth and the squalor of the only shelter that they could find. You know, "Away in a Manger" sounds romantic but the fact is the King of the universe, the One

who spoke the very universe into being was born of homeless parents in a crude hut or cave probably surrounded by farm animals. I mean after all he had for an infant crib a trough that was used to feed animals. The very King of glory paid an incredible price in emptying himself of his glory, and he also chose a birth of -- through the lowest of peasants to make his entry into flesh and blood. I think it was J. I. Packer said of the incarnation that if you can believe that God himself would consent to the so-colossal an insult as the taking on of flesh, so-colossal an insult that even the heavens themselves were stunned, well then the rest of the gospel, I mean the idea that Christ would willingly die for us and raise from the dead three days later to claim us as our own, that part is almost easier to believe. At the very end of Jesus's ministry here on earth, he was praying with his disciples, and this was shortly before he died and he said this in *John 17:5*, he said: "*And now, O Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was.*" You see, for 33 years while Jesus was here on earth, he had to set aside that glory. And he set it aside to live the life of a peasant carpenter scorned as the bastard child of a disgraced peasant couple in a backwater town of absolutely no consequence. This was the King of glory, made inglorious for us. And so we sing:

Hark! The herald angels sing,

"Glory to the newborn King!"

Peace on earth, and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled
Joyful, all ye nations, rise,
Join the triumph of the skies;
With th' angelic host proclaim,
"Christ is born in Bethlehem."

Now the next thing that Jesus had to give up was his majesty. And Peter's telling us about Christ's majesty in the scripture and he tells us about it because he was an eye witness to it. In *2 Peter 1:16* it says this, it says: *For we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eye witnesses of His majesty. For He received from God the Father honor and glory when such a voice came to Him from the Excellent Glory: "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."* And we heard this voice which came from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain. Now you remember when Peter heard this, remember when he had this experience, Peter and James and John were taken by Jesus up to this mountain, it's called the Mount of Transfiguration, and Mark's gospel in the ninth chapter gives us a fairly detailed description of what happened. It says this: *Now after six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John, and led them up on a high mountain apart by themselves; and He was transfigured before them. His clothes*

became shining, exceedingly white, like snow, such as no launderer on earth can whiten them. And Elijah appeared to them with Moses, and they were talking with Jesus. Then Peter answered and said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; and let us make three tabernacles: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah" because he did not know what to say, for they were greatly afraid. And a cloud came and overshadowed them; and a voice came out of the cloud, saying, "This is My beloved Son. Hear him!"

You know what happened on that mountain, what happened was that Jesus began to assume some of the majesty that he had had before he had come to earth. And for the disciples that majesty quickly went from amazement at what was taking place to absolute terror. You know scripture says Peter said, *"Let us make three tabernacles,"* but then it goes on to say why he said that, and the scripture here is very clear, it says that he said that because he was terrified. *Mark 9:6* says: *He did not know what to say for they were greatly afraid.* And you know Peter, ever the spokesman, sums up the disciples' fears and he starts it just by babbling. It says they were greatly afraid. And the Greek word for "afraid" here is translated in Strong's Greek Concordance as "frightened out of one's wits."

What could be so frightening about Jesus? You know perhaps a more

appropriate question would be which Jesus then are we talking about? You know, our 21st century version of Jesus plays heavily on this romanticized version of a perfect gentleman who wouldn't harm a flea. I mean Jesus is my friend, he's my buddy, he's my co-pilot, and with that image in mind it's kind of hard to imagine Jesus inspiring terror, and yet Peter is clearly frightened out of his wits. And years later in his letter he writes why. He says: *For we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eye witnesses of his majesty.* For a time on that mountain Jesus began to take on some of the majesty that belonged to him before he ever came to earth. And Peter -- or actually Mark is using his limited understanding to describe what happened, and he says: *"His clothes became shining, exceedingly white, like snow, such as no launderer on earth can ever whiten them."* They're not talking about laundry here. They're talking about an effulgent majesty that Jesus had, that he had kept veiled all during his public ministry. Peter saw a mere fraction of that majesty for mere moments and literally Peter flipped out. He had every reason to be terrified. Had Jesus elected to reveal his full majesty there on that mountain, then Peter, James, and John would have been fully consumed by the glory that emanated from Jesus. I mean you remember in Exodus, you remember when God revealed himself on Mt. Sinai? I mean he told Moses to warn the people if you get too near to God, you will die.

Exodus 19:21: And the LORD said to Moses, "Go down and warn the people, lest they break through to gaze at the LORD, and many of them perish." So God appears to Moses and he appears to Moses up on the mountaintop but down on the plains is a very different situation. This is the way the people at the plains reacted in Exodus 20:18, it says: Now all the people witnessed the thunderings, the lightening flashes, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they trembled and stood afar off. Then they said to Moses, "You speak with us, and we will hear; but let not God speak with us, lest we die."

Well now it's hundreds of years later and now God is returning but he's not returning to that mountaintop but to a manger. He's returning to a feeding trough set aside for animals inside a hut or a cave somewhere in Bethlehem, and instead of majesty there is in all likelihood the smell of manure. I mean this is the very King whose majesty broke out for a brief moment with Peter, James, and John possibly on the same mountaintop that it had broken out before with Moses, but for now his arrival has no majesty whatsoever.

Christ by highest heaven adored:

Christ, the everlasting Lord;

Late in time behold him come

Offspring of the favored one.

Veil'd in flesh, the Godhead see;
Hail, th'incarnate Deity:
Pleased, as man, with men to dwell,
Jesus, our Emmanuel!
Hark! the herald angels sing,
"Glory to the newborn King!"

So far we've seen no glory, no majesty and certainly no dominion. And now we might say, okay, what is dominion exactly? Well, "dominion" is the authority to rule. In *Genesis 1:26* it says: *Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."* You see, God originally gave us as his co-regents dominion over the entire earth. It was a shared dominion given by Christ to us but it was owned lock, stock, and barrel by Christ. We forfeited that dominion when Adam and Eve sided with the serpent and decided that ruling over the earth just really isn't enough. They wanted to be like God. And so they chose the forbidden fruit thinking that that would give them full dominion. Well instead it gave them the curse that all of us are still under. So we no longer share in the glory or the majesty or the dominion that God originally had vested in us, and yet to rescue and restore us, God had to forsake the

dominion that he had, the dominion he had over everything. *1 Peter 4:11* says: *That in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belong the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen.* That was not the case in that barn in Bethlehem. In fact the reason why Mary and Joseph were forced into that barn was because there was no room in the Inn. And the reason there was no room in the Inn was because *"A decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. So all went to be registered, everyone to his own city. Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with child."*

Now understand this, Jesus, he's the one who has complete dominion over the entire universe, now he's subject to Caesar's call for a census. Joseph and Mary have no choice but they -- but to return to the city of their birth to register, even though Mary is very close to her due date. And so here's Jesus entering into human flesh, completely powerless in the worst possible circumstance because he'd given up his dominion to serve us. We all know the rest of the story, I mean, the scripture is clear throughout all of Jesus's time on earth, he scrupulously rendered to Caesar the things that were Caesar's and to God the things that were God's.

There's one incident from Jesus's public ministry that points out how willing Jesus was to surrender that dominion that he owned to the earthly authorities. It's in Matthew 17. It says this. It's describing Jesus and the disciples. It says: *When they had come to Capernaum, those who received the temple tax came to Peter, and said, "Does your Teacher not pay the temple tax?" He said, "Yes."*

Now first of all I want you to just paint a picture in your mind of what this scene actually looks like. The disciples and Jesus had been all around, they've been out throughout the countryside doing mighty, mighty miracles and they were returning to Capernaum and they're in Capernaum, Jesus is inside a house and Peter's out on the street and as he's out on the street, some of the temple authorities approach him and they want to know, does your Jesus believe in the temple tax, and Peter says yeah, yes, he does. And then he enters into the house and there he finds Jesus who is already five steps ahead of him. It says in the scripture: *And when he had come into the house, Jesus anticipated him, saying, "What do you think, Simon? From whom do the kings of the earth take customs or taxes, from their sons or from strangers?" Peter said to Him, "From strangers."* See, Jesus was saying the taxes are only collected from strangers and certainly not from sons of the King. I mean it is the King and his sons who have taxes paid to them. Jesus is emphatically stating that he as the King and Peter as his adopted son are both in no way whatsoever subject to these

taxes. They have complete dominion over the temple and all of his treasures. But to demonstrate his willingness to give up his dominion and to be treated like a stranger, Jesus says this, he says: *"Then the sons are free. Nevertheless, lest we offend them, go to the sea, cast in a hook, and take the fish that comes up first. And when you have opened its mouth, you will find a piece of money; take that and give it to them for Me and you."*

You know, I wonder if Jesus ever paused to consider the absurdity of these temple authorities attempting to tax the one for whom the temple was built. Now nevertheless, Jesus, he just elected to pay the tax but don't you just love the way that he did it? You know, first he just made up a coin, and then he put it in the fish's mouth and he directed the fish to the hook and then he directed Peter to catch the fish, and there's something almost whimsical about God's determination not to offend but to come under the dominion of the temple authorities. These very same authorities would be the one who demanded his execution. I mean those same authorities came to arrest him later on on the night of his passion. He knew he was headed for his execution. Peter took out a sword, remember what he did? He took out a sword and he cut off the ear of one of the servants. Jesus said to him: *"Or do you think that I cannot now pray to my Father, and He will provide Me with more than twelve legions of angels? How then could the*

Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must happen thus?" You want to talk about dominion? Jesus just casually mentioned that twelve legions of angels were placed at his disposal. It took 6,000 Roman soldiers to make up a legion, so that means there's 72,000 angels that are arrayed in the heavens just waiting for a signal from Jesus to exercise their dominion over us. If Jesus had given that signal, I guarantee you, you and I would not be standing here today. Instead Jesus told Peter to put away his sword and he went willingly to the slaughter. His dominion as well as his glory and his majesty he set aside for us.

Hail! the heav'n born Prince of peace!

Hail! the Son of Righteousness!

Light and life to all he brings,

Risen with healing in his wings

Mild he lays his glory by,

Born that man no more may die;

Born to raise the sons of earth,

Born to give them second birth.

Hark! the herald angels sing,

"Glory to the newborn King!"

We have glory and majesty, dominion, and finally power. Power was set aside by Jesus for us. *Psalm 145 says: All Your works shall*

pays you, O LORD, and Your saints shall bless You. They shall speak of the glory of Your kingdom, and talk of Your power.

Hebrews 1:3 says: The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.

You know they say familiarity breeds contempt. The more familiar a figure is, the easier it is to take that figure for granted, and so it is with the son of God. I mean, I can tell you that of the son of God has such power that he spoke the entire universe into being and that he holds it together even now on a second by second basis by his power. *Colossians 1:15 says: He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him 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. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.* Jesus only had to speak and instantly the entire universe obeyed, whether it was oceans or mountains or creatures or planets or stars or galaxies. You know, the disciples saw Jesus as their Lord and their teacher but they really had no inkling of the extent of his power because he had laid it all aside. And it only took one incident for them to see that power and that happened while they were out on a lake. *Mark 4 says this: A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the*

boat, so that it was nearly swamped. Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. The disciples woke him and said to him, "Teacher, don't you care if we drown?" He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, "Quite! Be still!" Then the wind died down and it was completely calm. He said to his disciples, "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?" They were terrified and asked each other, "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!"

Just consider for a second the implications of what they just said. A furious squall and we can only imagine, these were veterans, these were people who had been on that lake for eons and they were terrified of this squall, so it must have been an incredibly awful one and it stopped instantly by the ruler of the wind and the waves. I mean the disciples were all too familiar with Jesus, I mean they'd lived with him for years now, they'd seen him hot, they'd seen him cold, they'd seen him hungry, they'd seen him thirsty, they'd seen him asleep and awake. I'm sure he appeared to them like just an ordinary man. They had no idea that he ruled over nature itself. They had no idea because he had distanced himself from the use of that power. Just imagine the shock and the terror the disciples felt when they saw this humble servant bark out an order to nature itself and nature instantly responds. You know, instead of the winds and the waves, he could have just as

well commanded the sun and moon to switch orbits and they too would have instantly obeyed. Even now when we think of Jesus, we seldom imagine the enormity of his power because he so seldom wielded it, and yet God tells us in his word that all the while Jesus was sharing in his disciples' humanity he was simultaneously upholding and sustaining the universe by his power alone. As Colossians says: *He is before all things and in him all things hold together.*

Now put that power in the context of this barn or cave or hut or whatever it was in Bethlehem. Nine months before that night, the Father had overshadowed the virgin Mary and there in her womb the greatest power that ever existed in the history of the universe became a zygote, a cell clinging to the womb of its mother. The Son of God had reduced himself to a human existence, cells removed from utter annihilation. Never had such grand power been reduced to such utter powerlessness. 2 cells became 4, 4 became 8, 8 became 16, then 32 and so on and nine months later in a barn in Bethlehem Mary gave birth to a helpless squalling baby who just also happened to be the King of the universe. And he who spoke the universe into existence could no longer speak. I mean, he could only babble and cry. He who made the mountains and the forests rise had not the power to raise his head. He could only lay back and wail like all babies do. And he who upheld and sustained the universe by his power alone was now totally dependent on Mary and

Joseph for his very life. He couldn't sit, he couldn't speak, he couldn't even feed himself. The ultimate power had become ultimately powerless and he did it all by emptying himself to become our high priest, tempted in all ways as we are but without sin. And again, *Philippians 2:5* says: *Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.*

The scripture doesn't end there although many think and act like it does. And if it did end there, then Jesus would be what so many people think of him, as a great teacher maybe who had a great philosophy, maybe somebody who gave us a great example, but none of those captures why Jesus came. You know, *Philippians 2* goes on to say: *And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.* See, if Jesus was just a great teacher or philosopher or example, then Christmas is no different than anybody else's birthday. But Jesus was unlike anyone else and his mission was unlike any others. He humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. See, Jesus came to earth to glorify his Father by redeeming us from the curse of Adam and Eve, and that redemption required a price. Jesus would have to

give up all of his divine prerogatives as the King of the universe, he would have to live the same life that we all have to live but he would have to live that life perfectly and then and only then would he be qualified to die as our perfect substitute. And to do that, God our Savior who alone is wise gave up glory and majesty, dominion and power only to recapture them all through the power of resurrection. *Philippians 2* also says this, it says: *And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on the earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

So here's the question. The question is where is Jesus for you this Christmas? I mean is he merely the object of those Christmas wars or is he the Lord and King come to earth to rescue his people from sin? He could be that for you. You see, God so loved this world that the blessings that fully belonged to him he willingly set aside so he could enter into our world not as a king, nor as a celebrity nor even as a person of power but as a powerless outsider, someone who knew firsthand what it meant to be told that there's no room in the Inn. Scripture says he was a man of sorrows

acquainted with grief. He poured out his life for his sheep from his first cry as a baby to his final cry as our crucified Lord all to give us one perfect gift and that gift is his perfect life, death and resurrection. And it can be counted as yours if you place your trust in him, if you make him the Lord of your life. *Romans 10* says: *If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.* So if God is touching you this Christmas season, please just take a minute and speak to me or speak to anyone of the deacons or elders, I beg you when God is speaking to you, open up that gift that is sitting, wrapped and ready before you. Listen when God's Spirit speaks to you.

Hark! the herald angels sing,
"Glory to the newborn King!"
Peace on earth, and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled.
Joyful, all ye nations rise,
Join the triumph of the skies;
With angelic host proclaim,
"Christ is born in Bethlehem."
Hark! the herald angels sing,
"Glory to the newborn King!"

Let's pray.

Father, we do give you glory and honor and majesty, power and dominion, all of those things that belong to you, all of those things that you set aside in order to join us in this life. We praise you and we thank you for the incredible gift that you've given us and if there's anyone here today that is wondering if that's part and parcel for them, I pray, Lord, that you would move in their hearts to accept by faith this glorious gift as well. And I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.