

ADVENTure: Groundhog Day
By Jason Huff
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If you've been with us the last few weeks, you know we've been on a time-travel adventure together. We explored the far past of the Old Testament, the birth of Jesus, and even the future as it is described in Scripture. We looked at how the Messiah was promised from the very foundations of humanity, and how His coming fulfilled thousands of years of prophecy. We also learned how many different possible futures all end with the same rallying cry: Jesus is coming again. It's been fun for me to write and hopefully made us all think a little differently.

But today, as we celebrate Christmas Eve, I'm going to turn to a different time travel adventure to wrap our minds around the true meaning of Christmas. That time travel adventure is set on a different holiday entirely – *Groundhog Day*. Maybe some of you have seen the Bill Murray movie; some of you haven't. But there's an element in *Groundhog Day* that shows us what Christmas is and what it isn't.

You see, in the movie *Groundhog Day*, Bill Murray plays Phil, an obnoxious, self-centered weatherman assigned to go to Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania to cover the annual Groundhog Day festivities. All he can think about is himself and how he'd rather be doing anything else than a public interest story in a small Podunk. After making his news crew miserable, they get stuck in town due to a snowstorm.

Phil wakes up the next day only to find himself repeating Groundhog Day over and over again. It's his worst nightmare come to life. And no matter what he does, every day is the same. He's stuck in Punxsutawney. Once he figures this out, his selfishness comes out in spades, eating whatever he wants, attempting to date every woman in town. Eventually, Phil becomes despondent and suicidal. Nothing will break the loop. Finally, he starts trying what he'd never thought of before – becoming a better person. It's this final process that breaks the cycle.

Now none of this spoils the movie because it's a comedy; it's not about the plot, and there's never an explanation of why Phil is stuck reliving one day. But there are parallels to the journey each of us is on through life.

We don't repeat the same physical day over and over again, but we get stuck in loops of our own. Work five days, go to school five days, have a day off, come to church, get ready for the next week, do it all over again week after week, year after year. A lot of what we do feels the same. Children grow up; we get older; yet the routine grinds away at us. We start to wonder if life was supposed to be like this, or if we're missing something more – something deeper, richer, grander than what life has become.

But there's a loop that's darker and more disturbing than just the drudgery of ordinary life. That is the constant loop of sin and death. Even if we have no concept of the God of the Bible, even if we don't think it's possible to disobey God because we don't believe in Him, we recognize that we are constantly at war with ourselves and our actions.

We hurt other people. The people we hurt most are usually the people we care about the most. We lie. We cheat. We steal. We hold on to anger, we stoke the fire of lust, we plan to do bad things. We talk badly about other people. We may try to give it a nice sheen, to explain it away, to say that we're really not bad people. But we recognize that there is something really wrong with us. And when we do believe in God, that guilt we feel, the shame, it's given a name and a reason. The name is sin; the core of all sin is disobedience to our maker; the reason we feel guilty is that we are guilty. There is a standard higher than us, a law greater than us, and we have failed to live up to it.

Death is the natural result of this disobedience. We have the sin nature from our conception; we exercise it in different ways throughout our lives; it is why we eventually die. Everyone sins, so everyone dies. It is a loop we cannot escape.

And unlike *Groundhog Day*, we do not get do-overs. We can fix and mend things, but we cannot un-break them. Unlike *Groundhog Day*, we don't become better people given enough time. And unlike *Groundhog Day*, our own goodness, our ability to live out the perfect day, doesn't break the loop; it doesn't break the cycle of sin and death. Because there's the next day, and the next, and the next. I can have a wonderful day and the next day wake up on the wrong side of the bed and be miserable to other people. Our circumstances often dictate our attitude. We are stuck.

That's ultimately why we celebrate Christmas. When Jesus comes, when the Son of God gives up all that is rightfully His to obey the Father, when the Kingdom of God breaks into our world in the form of a tiny baby, the cycle is broken. What Adam created with his disobedience, the never-ending pattern of sin and death, Jesus destroys through His obedience.

At the manger, everything changes. At the manger, there is hope of life after death. At the manger, we glimpse that God loves us – not in a distant way, not far removed from us, not in the way that Moses experienced when he was told no one could see the face of God and live. At the manger, God's love becomes real and apparent to us. In Jesus, God takes on human form and walks among us. We could not approach Him in His glory, so He came as one of us in humility so that we might look upon Him and find His grace and forgiveness. He came as an infant for many reasons, but in doing so, we know He is like us in every way except our sin.

When we look at the other side of the manger, when we look at the cross some thirty years away, we see Jesus take on the sins of His people. And while we sometimes have a hard time with the resurrection, we realize that it makes perfect sense. The one who does not sin, God's Holy One, will not see decay, the Psalms say. There's only one resurrection because only one person has ever lived perfectly in the will of God the Father. And because Jesus did not sin and yet died, He could become our ransom. He could wipe away the eternal debt of our treason. And because He did not sin, He continues to live on as our Savior, our King, and our friend.

When you come to the manger today, know that you need not be guilty any longer. You need not be ashamed. The cycle is finished; the chains are broken; the burden lifted; the price paid; the debt forgiven. When you believe and trust in Christ, you are made new. You follow Christ not out of obligation but gratitude. Old patterns begin to break. Not because you have suddenly become good, but because God is good and is remolding you in His image. And while we will all still go through the valley of the shadow of death, we know the light on the other side. We need not fear for Christ is here.

As we celebrate the birth of Jesus, as we give our gifts and fill the stockings and light the tree, may we remember that Christmas is not ultimately about sentimentality or nostalgia. It's not about carols or choirs singing. It's not about figuring out if Jesus was born in a cave or the animal stall in someone's home, or if the magi arrived the night of Jesus' birth or a long time later. It's about God come to us. It's about God with us. And it's about God being with us forevermore. Where once there was darkness, now there is light. Where once there was fear, now there is hope. Where once there was sin, now there is forgiveness and obedience. Come worship the King and find rest for your souls at His feet, where the cycle is broken and where new life begins.