

A Broken Christmas: Breaking Hearts
By Jason Huff
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Psalm 34:17-22; Isaiah 61:1-3; Luke 2:21-35

Our final Scripture reading today is Luke 2:21-35. May God's richest blessings be on the reading of His holy, sacred, and perfect Word. "On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise the child, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he had been conceived. When the time of their purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord"), and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: "a pair of doves or two young pigeons." Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying: "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." The child's father and mother marveled at what was said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too."

Growing up, there was a phrase I heard about boys and girls who were charismatic, charming, and good-looking. People would say, "You're going to grow up to be a heart-breaker." Sometimes it's said as if it was a good thing! Musicians get a huge amount of mileage out of the idea. Led Zeppelin had a massive hit with a song named "Heartbreaker." Pat Benetar's "Heartbreaker" made her a name in rock music in the early '80s. Dionne Warwick recorded still another song called "Heartbreaker" that became one of her greatest hits – she was quoted as saying, "I cried all the way to the bank." Other songs with the same name were recorded by Mariah Carey, Justin Bieber, Michael Jackson...the list goes on. If we ever need to make some money, we just need to write a song called "Heartbreaker" and we can cash in!

But the idea really isn't something we think about very positively. According to the dictionary, heartbreak is "crushing grief, anguish, or distress." A heartbreaker is someone or something that causes that kind of trauma. Nobody wants a broken heart. Any of us who have experienced that kind of loss knows we'd never intentionally go through it again. Wounds we feel that deeply are hard to take and hard to overcome.

As we've gone through our Broken Christmas series, we've seen many things that Jesus' birth signaled – the breaking of the old patterns of the world, everything from the old religious festivals to the endless cycle of sacrifices. Jesus' arrival heralded the breaking of chains, setting us free from our slavery to sin. Last week, we saw how Jesus' coming announced the arrival of the Kingdom of God in our midst, how it thwarts the powers and nations of our world.

But this week's idea hits closer to home, maybe painfully so. Did Jesus come to break hearts? I believe so – but not in the way we think of the term. He definitely wasn't a romantic heartbreaker like we think of! Scripture tells us in Isaiah 53:2 that He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him. Jesus didn't stand out as the dashing handsome man that we've seen in different films. He came as a different kind of heartbreaker...one who came to destroy our idolatry and our dreams of worldly success, and to replace our old hearts with new ones.

In Ezekiel 36:26-27, God promises His people after they have profaned His name and become a laughingstock of the nations, "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and cause you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws." Way back in the Old Testament era, long before Jesus' birth, God was promising a day when His people would no longer have a hard heart towards Him. As we've learned in our recent study of Acts, shortly after Jesus' resurrection, the Spirit fell on the believers, and they preached and taught and acted like people with new hearts. We've seen that promised day come. But the process of breaking hearts isn't always easy.

Let's look first at today's passage. Mary and Joseph, being good and righteous parents following the directions of the Lord, have Jesus circumcised on the eighth day after His birth and officially give Him the name they were instructed to give Him by the angel. They eventually go up to the temple to have Jesus dedicated and to make a proper sacrifice by the Law. They are still at the point when everything is pretty good...no wise men yet, no running off to Egypt. King Herod is going to be after this child, and they bring Jesus right under His nose, and nobody has a clue!

All except Simeon. Simeon loves God, and he has been waiting for this day for a long time. God has blessed Simeon, promising him through the Holy Spirit that he would see the Messiah before he died. Now nobody has said anything to him. The consecration of a child is common at the temple. And yet Simeon knows who this is. Mary and Joseph are kind of astonished by this – they've already seen a miracle in Jesus' birth, the first and only one of its kind. They've had shepherds come at His birth and worship at His tiny feet.

And yet they marvel about what Simeon says about Jesus. This man, seemingly out of nowhere, comes and talks to them, takes the baby Jesus in his arms, and prophecies about Him. He knows this is the Christ. And what's more, Simeon understands that Jesus will be controversial. This is not the warrior prince a lot of people expect, the one who might take up sword and shield to take on Caesar. No, Jesus the Messiah is going to cause the rise and fall of many in Israel. Many will speak against Him. Hearts will be revealed. And, Simeon says, "A sword will pierce your own soul, too."

The sword mentioned here is a barbarian's weapon, much bigger than what a Roman soldier carried. It would have painted a vivid picture. Mary will have a broken heart, a soul not just pierced but shredded by a gigantic wound. It's one that we can barely imagine. Raising the Son of God would have been an awesome, overwhelming responsibility. So many children died young due to disease and accidents. Every sniffle, every scrape, takes on a whole new tone. I don't doubt that Mary might have been the first helicopter parent!

Then Jesus' ministry begins and Mary feels every step of Jesus' journey profoundly. She gently tries to goad Him into using His power at the wedding in Cana where the wine has run out. She worries when she hears the reports that Jesus has gone mad in His teachings, tracking Him down to make sure she's OK. I cannot imagine the panic she felt when the crowd in Nazareth started to make moves to push Him off the local cliff.

And she is there in Jerusalem for Passover on the fateful week when Jesus enters into Jerusalem triumphantly, only to be led out of the city to be crucified on Golgotha. Scripture shows us that the resurrection came as a surprise to everyone, even though Jesus told His disciples about it many, many times. When Jesus died on the cross, Mary thought she had lost her Jesus, maybe forever. While there was a hope of a resurrection of the dead someday, no one had the spiritual insight to see that Jesus was talking about His literal resurrection three days after His crucifixion. Mary's heart was absolutely broken. And we can't help but feel for Mary at Jesus' ascension – while she knew He was alive and would be her King, she would still miss His physical presence. Absolutely heartbreaking.

Going beyond today's passage, though, we see a core part of Jesus' ministry was breaking hearts down so that He could repair them. For as much as Jesus broke hearts, He also fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah 61. He was sent to "bind up the brokenhearted." Psalm 147:3 tells us that God "heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds." But as we've learned throughout this series, some things have to be broken before they can be repaired.

The biggest obstacle to a repaired, healed heart is pride in ourselves and our own abilities, ultimately our desire to be our own gods. One of John Calvin's most famous quotes is, "Human nature is a perpetual factory of idols." We don't think of it like the ancients did; we don't create statues as representations to bow down to and worship. And yet our biggest idol is ourselves. We think we can be good enough to put God in our debt – and if we can put God in our debt, if we can require Him to save us or to be nice to us, then who is actually God? We are.

Jesus' Sermon on the Mount was His heartbreaker speech. It starts off with the Beatitudes, and the very first one is this: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of God." Who are the poor in spirit? They are the ones that know they have nothing they can offer God, who know that without Him, they are nothing. They are the tax collectors, the prostitutes, the infamous sinners who came to Jesus because He offered them mercy despite their overwhelming sense of guilt and shame. The people we least expect to be blessed belong to the Kingdom because they are the first to ask God for mercy. They know they need it.

As the Sermon on the Mount goes on, Jesus puts the squeeze on the people in the crowd who think they are morally righteous people. You thought you were following the Law, Jesus says, when you didn't physically murder or commit adultery. But you broke the Law when you hated your neighbor and lusted after his wife. You sinned when you hated your enemy rather than loving him and wanting the best for him. And if Jesus isn't clear enough, He states, "Be perfect, therefore, as your Heavenly Father is perfect."

When Jesus meets Nicodemus, He tells him, “No one can see the Kingdom of God unless he is born again.” We must be born again of the Spirit. No one can be good enough to merit the Kingdom. The seemingly impossible must happen – we have to be born again. And yet, through the Holy Spirit, given to us at the time we have faith in Christ, this renewal happens. Nicodemus was stymied because he thought it was solely about following the Law. Instead, it’s about being remade. Nicodemus’ pride of heart had to be broken.

Think too of Peter. Boisterous, headstrong, a big talker. He stands out in a crowd. He is the first to acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God. But he’s also full of pride, so certain Jesus should not die in Jerusalem that he attempts to rebuke Him, telling Him, “This will never happen to you!” Jesus has to say, “Get behind me, Satan!” before Peter relents. Peter knows he is a sinful man; that’s not what’s holding him back. He is not proud of what he’s done. Yet he is still a proud man, so sure of himself, so confident. But when Jesus is arrested and Peter denies knowing Him three times, he becomes a truly broken man. He has betrayed his Master. All that pride and arrogance tumbles down around him.

It’s precisely at that point that Jesus meets Peter following the resurrection. He meets Peter on the beach and restores him as leader of the disciples. Jesus asks him, “Do you love me?” three times, once for each denial. Jesus gives him a calling – “feed my sheep.” And Jesus assures Peter that even in his death, he will glorify God and bring Jesus honor. Jesus repairs Peter’s broken heart, and he becomes the greatest of the apostles.

Where does your heart stand this Christmas? As Simeon said, our hearts are revealed as our attitudes towards Jesus come out. If we enjoy all the lights and the stories, if we love the nativity and the manger, if we sing all the songs and hang up the decorations, if we do all of those things and yet don’t let our hearts be permanently touched by Jesus, we’ve missed the boat. We’ve not actually celebrated Christmas.

Christmas can be a crazy difficult time of year for us. Not just because of all the hustle and bustle, but from the things we’ve lost over the years. Family and friends, those lost to us either by death or by time or by misunderstandings and hard feelings. Maybe you’re brokenhearted because Christmas has become less about Jesus and more about all the losses. Maybe you’re like Mary – you fear the pain you know will come, and you’re trying to protect yourself from it, to shield yourself from it by trying to swallow and bury those emotions.

Jesus promises to be there for you in the midst of that. He promises to heal your broken heart. He wants you to have the Holy Spirit so that you will always know His peace and presence with you, so that you know no matter whatever happens in this world, you are not alone. Turning to Jesus will never leave you empty. And turning to Jesus allows you to receive the healing that only He can bring. A lot of things in our world promise to take away the pain, but they just distract us from it. They don’t fix it; they often make it worse. Jesus can bind up the wound and heal it. Turn to Him this Christmas and know that you are a beloved child of God promised His Kingdom.

Some of us, though, aren't in that place. Some of us believe that we are pretty good, enough that Jesus should give us a seat at the table just for being us. Maybe the pain we've suffered in our lives makes us feel like God owes us something good. Or maybe we're just prideful like Peter – we love God, we want to be more like Jesus, but life keeps getting in the way. Our pride keeps getting in the way. Our mouth, our attitude, our desires, our anger – they keep getting in the way.

Jesus can heal all those things too. He came to break our fallen, rotten hearts so He could mend them and replace them with clean, new, holy ones. It's interesting to me – Jesus called out the Pharisees time and again, but it was always with the idea that they could repent and get right with God. Most did not. Yet Nicodemus, the Pharisee confused about being born again, he stuck around; he was there at Jesus' crucifixion and brought burial spices; he was with Joseph of Arimathea who offered the tomb he owned. God can change anyone's heart. Obviously, Nicodemus' heart was changed from that of the self-righteous stereotypical Pharisee.

God works in spite of us. No one, least of all Peter, expected Peter to be restored. There's no record of Peter begging for forgiveness. He thinks he's done, finished, a traitor to the cause. He went back on his word never to disown Jesus – a huge offense in that era, where your word was your contract – and he did it three times. Jesus is the one who moves, the one who heals Peter. It is not Peter striving to get right with the Lord; Jesus forgives, Jesus restores, Jesus heals, and Peter is changed. It is at Peter's lowest point, the point where his heart and soul are pierced with his own sin and unfaithfulness and spiritual poverty, that Jesus says, "Feed my sheep and follow me."

We might wonder why we suffer pain and loss in this world, and there are countless reasons. Only in heaven, only in eternity will we learn from God why things worked out the way they did. But hearts broken by God and for God will be mended. If God is working in everything for the eternal good of His people who love Him, as Romans 8:28 says, then even those heartbreaks will mold us and shape us into the people He wants us to be

My prayer for us this Christmas is that our hearts would be broken by Jesus. Not because we want pain or heartache, not that we should suffer great sorrow, but that our hearts would be open to the Savior. That our hearts would be wounded enough that all the garbage of the world that's been stuffed inside of us for so long would just run right out onto the floor, that room would be made for the Holy Spirit to do His holy healing work inside of us, that we would experience the wonderful presence of the Lord and know that whatever heartache we've had is nothing in comparison to the overwhelming wonder of knowing the Lord, knowing that He loves us, knowing that He came for us, that He lived and died and rose again for us, knowing that because He's broken our hearts now, we will spend eternity with Him with a heart that's healed and whole and able to give love and receive love just as God always intended.