

CHRISTMAS AT UZ

by Ray C. Stedman

It is a common thing for writers of songs and books to describe Christmas as it has been celebrated in various unusual places of the earth. Many of you, perhaps, have read Bret Harte's wonderful little story Christmas at Roaring Camp, located up in the Sierra Nevada back in the gold rush days. At our house we have been listening to Bing Crosby singing Christmas in Killarney, and that is somewhat unusual. Then there is Christmas in Hawaii, and we have been listening to what Christmas in Mississippi is like. So I feel somewhat justified in looking in with you on a Christmas celebration in the ancient land of Uz, found in Chapter 42 of the book of Job, of all places.

In Verses 10-11 of this short chapter we have a description of this:

And the Lord restored the fortunes of Job, when he had prayed for his friends; and the Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before. Then came to him all his brothers and sisters and all who had known him before, and ate bread with him in his house; and they showed him sympathy and comforted him for all the evil that the Lord had brought upon him; and each of them gave him a piece of money and a ring of gold. (Job 42:10-11 RSV)

Doesn't that sound like Christmas? I suppose you are saying, "Wait a minute. Come on, there is no Christmas in that! Why, this was long before Christmas ever was known. This is 2,000 years before Christ came. How could there be Christmas in this book of Job?"

I was told that a couple of people from this congregation were discussing my sermons one morning and one of them said, "I don't see how he gets out of the text all that he finds there. I read that and I don't see those things." The other person said, "Well, there's a very simple explanation of that. It is because they're not in there, that's why!"

Well, the Bible is a wonderful book, and the most wonderful thing about it, I think, is the way it is built. It is, in fact, in many ways a collection of stories, wonderful stories, the most beautiful and marvelous stories in all the world. All of us have grown up with these stories and been fascinated by them. Whenever they appear on television or in the movies they are still tremendously popular. The reason for that is these are more than mere stories; they are historical things that actually happened. But also they are God's picture book in which he is showing us what goes on inside of us, as well, the inner story of every life. That is why the Bible never gets out of date, never gets old and dusty. If we think it does it is because we have failed to catch the glory, the brightness, and the beauty of some of these stories. So here in this book of Job we have a story that I think, if we look at it very closely, does indeed resemble Christmas and has a Christmas theme to it. Let us look at it together and see what we can find.

The very first thing you note about this is that the occasion that is described here is a family gathering. Job's brothers and sisters (we do not know how many), and all his friends who had known him before are getting together. The uncles and aunts are there, and of course with them all the cousins, nephews and nieces and all the grandchildren. By this time Job is a man 70 years of age or more, and though his own children had all perished, he must have had grandchildren and great-grandchildren by now, and all the neighbors and friends had brought their families. So this was a

great family occasion as Christmas is for us, and always has been.

There is nothing like the family get-together at Christmas. I think many of you here are here because you have come home for Christmas to be with the family. Our songs reflect the idea that there is no loneliness like being alone at Christmas, away from the family and friends. The nostalgia of this season is all centered around that warm circle of family and friends together around the Christmas tree or the family hearth. We associate that with Christmas and it has always been that way from the very beginning of the Christmas story.

The second thing you see here is that this was a time of feasting. It says they all gathered and "ate bread with him in his house," (Job 42:11 RSV). Surely they had more than bread. This is a metaphorical expression for a tremendous feast. They gathered to eat together, and we do that the same way today. We start with stuffed turkey and we end with stuffed people! This has always been the custom at Christmas. In medieval times, according to the descriptions we have, they used to go out in the forest and kill a wild boar and bring it in and roast it and that would be the center of the feast at Christmas. The menu is different for Christmas feasts in many parts of the world. In England until the most recent times they would have a Christmas goose. In his writings Charles Dickens describes in mouth-watering terms the appearance of the Christmas goose. In the south of our country, oftentimes, ham is the center of the Christmas feast.

I do not know what they had here at Job's feast, but they had something. In Bible times often it was a calf that was roasted at special times. You all remember the story of the prodigal son who came home and his father killed the fatted calf. I do not know whether they had a fatted calf at Job's house or not. I would guess (and this is purely a guess, coming from what we familiarly call "the Stedmaniac translation of the Bible!") that they may have had a roast ostrich! Job mentioned this bird a little earlier in the book and tells us how easy it was to catch an ostrich. He was a stupid animal; God had made him that way. I do not know if they had a roast ostrich, but for a big occasion like this they would have to have something about that size. Maybe they made a huge omelet out of a dozen ostrich eggs! Whatever it was they had a great feast and everybody had plenty to eat.

Then there is a third thing here that I think we can associate with Christmas. It is what we would call "fellowship." It says, "they showed him sympathy and comforted him for all the evil that the Lord had brought upon him," (Job 42:11 RSV). Job's family and friends gathered to comfort him and to express sympathy and understanding for all the pain and suffering he had been going through.

In our neighborhood we have a couple of brand-new neighbors, refugees from Vietnam, who moved in with their children. They had once fled from the communist threat from North Vietnam into South Vietnam and later, when the war was lost there, they fled from that country and came here to the United States, leaving everything behind and starting life over here. So recently we gathered several families around us and went over to welcome them to make them feel at home, to comfort them and to sympathize with them for the pressures they had been under and the losses they had experienced. Surely nothing is more typical of the spirit of Christmas than to express comfort and sympathy for those who have endured hardship, trial and difficulty during the year. We gathered for that very reason.

But there is a strange note here. It says that as they gathered with Job on this occasion, "they comforted him for all the evil that the Lord had brought upon him." That is a strange way to put it, isn't it? Usually when we get together at Christmas we are rejoicing for all the grace that God has shown to us and thanking him for all the blessings that had come our way. But here they comforted Job, it says, because of all the evil which the Lord had brought upon him.

Now I believe at this point Job interrupted them. It does not say that here. I understand that. This is one of the things, perhaps, that you will charge me with reading into the text. But I cannot believe that this dear old patriarch who has been going through months of pain and suffering almost beyond description would let these neighbors and friends, brothers and sisters, come in and accuse God of bringing evil into his life and comforting him for that.

If we have a vivid imagination we can picture this scene with all these people gathered in the living room. There is a big fire in the fireplace and they are talking to Job about the terrible things he went through and what evil the Lord had brought on him. Job lifts his hand and says, "Wait a minute friends, you've got it all wrong. Let me explain some things to you. Once I thought like you. There was a time when I too thought that these things that happened to me were evil. You remember the tragic day all my children, seven fine sons and three beautiful daughters, were killed by a terrible whirlwind that blew down the house they were in? On that same day the tribes around Canaan stole my cattle, my camels, my asses and all the animals I had. I was impoverished and heartbroken all in one day. Some of you remember that I took it in good stride. I said, 'Well, the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.' I did trust God. I believed he was my friend. I tried to walk before him in the best way I knew how, and I believed that if he brought this kind of thing, it was only momentary and that he would make up for it.

"But it did not happen that way. As many of you know, I began to develop these awful boils. You can see the scars on my arms and hands and face. All over my body I have scars like these from these terrible boils that tortured and tormented me day and night until I sat in the dust heap scraping off the running pus with broken pieces of pottery. I waited for this to pass. I thought it was only a temporary thing, but it kept going on and on and on, unrelieved, and I began to doubt. I began to wonder whether God was indeed the God of love and justice that he said he was and that he claimed to be.

"Then I began to complain. You know how I voiced my complaint and told you all how I felt. Finally, I began to charge God with evil, just as you have said today. I said that these were evil things that God had no right to bring; that it was unfair for me to be subjected to this kind of treatment.

"As you know, it was all made worse by three tiresome old do-gooders who wanted to help me, but they almost drove me up the wall with their accusations. I have to admit that I said some mean things to them as well because I was hurting so bad. But do you know something? I discovered that God was not doing evil to me at all. I discovered that he was teaching me two mighty truths that I have come to learn through that time of trial, hardship, pressure and pain; truths that are so marvelous, so wonderful, that if I did not know them now I would gladly go through all I've gone through again and again that I might learn them.

"Let me share them with you, friends. The first thing God showed me was that I had a mediator. Now I didn't know that before. I didn't think I needed one between me and God. I regarded God as my friend, the faithful supplier of all my needs, and if I would walk before him as he wanted me to he would give me everything in life that I needed; he would give me prosperity and peace and blessing. But as this pain went on and these terrible boils got worse and worse and nothing would relieve them, I discovered that I felt very far removed from God. God was great and pure, holy and powerful, and I kept seeing myself as weak and hurting, fragile, limited, and all alone. I kept asking myself, 'How could a God of great power and terrible might and wisdom know how I feel?'

"I began to feel sorry for myself. I began to see that there had to be some way by which the two of

us could be brought together. I remember crying out on one occasion, 'Oh that there were a daysman, a mediator, who could lay his hand on God and on me and bring us together.' Do you know, friends, the Spirit of God in my heart began to teach me something? I began to see that there was a Mediator that God had in mind. I remember on one occasion I saw it so clearly that I cried out, 'I know that my witness is in heaven, and he who vouches for me is on high.' I didn't know how this Mediator would work or what he would do, but I knew that God himself somehow would work to bring together my poor, fragile, limited, hurting, suffering being and his greatness and power and might and glory. I saw that so clearly one day that I cried out, 'I know that my Redeemer lives and on the earth one day shall stand and though the skin worms destroy this body, yet with my flesh I shall see my God.'

"Now friends, I don't know when he is going to come, but the Spirit of God has taught me that one of these days God is going to send a Redeemer. Already, because he is God, I can lay hold of the benefits of that work. He is coming in the future. It will probably be at a time when the whole earth, like me, has come to the end of its rope; when all the wisdom of the philosophers has failed and all the military might of the greatest nations of earth has been unable to bring about peace on earth and men everywhere have given up, sunk in hopeless despair. I believe then that God will act and a Redeemer will come. I know that my Redeemer lives, and on the earth will stand.

"I don't know how he's going to come, but having learned something of the nature of God, I believe that it is not going to be in some pretentious display of glory. God doesn't work that way. Our God, I've learned, is a lover of humility. I don't believe he'll come as a great and mighty king with a retinue of followers displaying open glory. Knowing God as I've come to know him, I believe he'll probably come in some obscure place, hardly known by anybody, and from some hidden, obscure couple that nobody ever heard anything of. He may even come as a tiny little baby, the, most helpless thing there is in all the universe. That would be like God, to do it that way.

"But there is a second thing I've learned through this, my friends. Not only did I learn that I had a Mediator, but God also showed me the problem that the Redeemer had to handle. He showed me the problem of evil, how dark and ugly it is, how powerful it is. He showed me the power of evil, symbolized by two great beasts, ferocious beasts, unconquerable, invincible dragons, breathing fire out of their mouths. God showed me that those two invincible beasts, reflecting an ugliness and an evil that was beyond description were located in my own heart. I saw in me the self-centeredness of the flesh and nothing I could do would get rid of it. I saw the awful love of praise and glory and power of the world around me which I had taken pride in, and the way my righteousness had given me standing before others.

"Friends, I had to humble myself and to see that God had simply brought me to a place where I could see the way things really are. I saw that I could not deliver myself, but I had to cast myself upon his grace. You know friends, when that happens, something wonderful takes place. I don't know how it happened, I didn't even expect it, but when I repented, when I saw it was God's problem and not mine and that he alone could handle it, the Spirit of my Redeemer did something about it. He brought God and me together and I knew my sins were forgiven. Peace flooded my heart like I've never known before. In the days that followed my sores began to heal. Nothing had helped them before but now, as you can see, there are only scars left.

"You know, friends, I don't care now whether I'm poor or rich. I don't care whether I'm sick or well, or whether I'm all alone or with others. The joy that I've found with my God, the peace that he has given me, the glory and the sense of forgiveness and the wonder of his love are so rich and so wonderful they are worth everything I've gone through and much more besides. No, friends, God

didn't send evil into my life. I don't need you to comfort me for that. God sent good.

"I remember something I said back in the days when I was hurting. I didn't know fully what it meant then, but I can say it now with fresh and great meaning: 'He knows the way that I take and when he has tried me I shall come forth as gold.' God did that, friends. So this was not evil. It was deliverance."

There is a fourth thing here that reminds me of Christmas. It is the giving of gifts. It says, "...each of them gave him a piece of money and a ring of gold," (Job 42:11 RSV). Money is made of silver and the ring was made of gold. These friends gave to Job gifts of silver and gold. In the Bible those two metals are used symbolically as a picture of redemption. Silver is the sign of redemption, and gold is the picture of deity, God redeeming man. That is why I say this is Christmas here at Job's house. Job's witness to his friends evidently had such effect upon them that in gratitude for what they learned from him they gave him gifts of silver and gold to express their understanding of the redemption of God among men.

I wonder if this is not a hint of why we give gifts at Christmas time? Not because we are looking for something back -- that is the way the world gives. Christians give gifts because they have already been made rich beyond compare and they want to share it in some way with those who have less. If Christmas means anything at all to us, then, it means that Job discovered 2,000 years before the cross, and before the birth of Jesus at Bethlehem, that the One who was coming into the world would come, and as the angel said to Mary, "He shall save his people from their sins," (Matthew 1:21). I think this is what brings joy and gladness to every heart at Christmas time. If you know the Lord Jesus you have the greatest gift God can give to men. Out of the richness of your life, if you have that gift, you will find yourself gladly sharing of all that you have with those who have less, that there may be the ringing out of joy and thanksgiving on a season like this.

Well, perhaps you think me far-fetched on this. I don't know. But I believe we are justified in seeing that this was a Christmas celebration 2,000 years before Christmas ever came. That is the way God teaches his people.

Prayer:

Our great and heavenly Father, we do not think that we comprehend the mystery and the marvel of this great event, how your Spirit can enter our human spirits, how Jesus himself can be born again in a human heart today as he was born into the manger of Bethlehem 2,000 years ago. But we know it happens, and the change that is made is very visible and evident to all around. You do give gifts, Lord, gifts that no man can give of joy, love, peace, grace, mercy and compassion, and all that accompanies these great gifts. We thank you that you came into the cold, smelly, dark, ugly stable of our hearts and brought light and life, peace and joy. We bless your name for that and pray that the good news of this new birth can be spread to many today, that in this weary, worn, empty world men will find the joy of Christ. We ask in his name, Amen.

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