

Born to Die

By David de Bruyn

At this time of year, Christians seek to celebrate the birth of Christ. The actual time of His birth is not the issue – the event of it is. This time of year should be a celebration of the Incarnation. However, the time of Christmas would be far more beneficial to Christians, far more spiritually enriching, if we kept one thought in mind – Jesus Christ was born to die.

Too often, one gets the impression that the birth itself is the climax of the Christian calendar. Certainly, the day He was born brought praise and adoration from the angels in heaven – but not simply because of the birth. The birth was not an end in itself. Jesus Christ was born to die.

Indeed, when the angels sang in **Luke 2:11**, they said: *“For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.”* The joy was not over merely the birth – but that it was the birth of a Saviour. The joy was not merely that a baby was now born, the joy was over the identity of the baby – a Saviour. The angels looked forward to the day of His redeeming work at Calvary. They celebrated His birth – because He was born to die.

Christ’s mission in coming to Earth was not to teach us moral lessons, though He did that. His mission was not to be an example of relating to God the Father, though He did that. His mission was not merely to keep the Law perfectly, though He did that. His mission was not to heal the population, going around alleviating suffering and sickness, though He did that. No, Christ’s mission is stated in **Luke 19:10**: *“For the Son of Man is come to seek and to save that which was lost.”*

Christ came to redeem sinners. He came to give His life as a substitutionary sacrifice for the sins of the world. He came to shed His blood – to die and rise again so that sinners could be reconciled to God. This was the main reason He was born.

Jesus Christ, the sinless Son of God, lived a perfect life and was sinless in His nature. He then died, not for His own sins, but because He was sinless, for the sins of others. All who receive Him by repentant faith have their sins forgiven in His death on Calvary, and have His perfect life, His perfect law-keeping, His perfect righteousness imputed to them. This is why He came. This is the message of the Gospel. This is why He was born.

It is amazing how Christ’s birth pointed to His death both by similarity and by contrast. Let us look at some of the circumstances of His birth which point towards His death. As we see each one, may our hearts rejoice in the wisdom of God, that He was, and is, reminding the world – Christ was born to die.

Consider the deep contrast of the gifts.

The gifts of the wise men were interesting in their implications. One of the gifts was myrrh. Myrrh was often used as a painkiller. When Jesus was on the cross, **Mark 15:23** tells us: *“And they gave him to drink wine mingled with myrrh: but he received it not.”* At birth, he was given

myrrh as a gift by a foreign wise man. At death, he was offered myrrh by a foreign soldier. Myrrh was also used to embalm the body of Jesus before His resurrection.

Or consider the gift of gold. Gold symbolised royalty. It was the stuff of crowns and sceptres. Gold represented the statement of the wise men that this was the King of the Jews. It was the acknowledgement of His royalty in advance. What kind of crown did He wear on the day of His death?

And when they had platted a crown of thorns, they put it upon His head, and a reed in His right hand: and they bowed the knee before Him, and mocked Him, saying, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' And they spit upon him, and took the reed, and smote Him on the head.

Matthew 27:29-30

He was made a 'crown', a 'head-covering' of thorns – the ultimate mockery of His claim to be the King of Israel. It was the epitome of humiliation – to wear a crown of piercing, painful thorns, when He rightly deserved a golden crown. At birth, foreign rulers presented him with gold. At death, foreign soldiers pierced Him with a crown of thorns.

Consider the contrast in recognition and honour.

At His birth, foreign Kings laid gifts at His feet, adoring Him as the King of Israel. At His death, the Roman ruler Pilate put a mocking title above Christ's head on the cross: *"This is Jesus, the King of the Jews"* (**Matthew 27:37**).

His birth was marked by the adoration of men who had travelled hundreds of kilometres to see Him. His death was marked by the indifference of a man who washed his hands of him, and would not so much as leave his palace. The deep contrast is deliberate, God wants us to know Jesus was born to die.

Indeed, God made sure Mary understood that He was born to die. Not only were the gifts of the wise men related to death in some ways, but when Mary and Joseph presented Jesus in Jerusalem, they meet the devout Simeon, who prophesies that He is indeed the Messiah.

And Simeon blessed them, and said unto Mary his mother, 'Behold, this Child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel; and for a sign which shall be spoken against; (Yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also,) that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.'

Luke 2:34-35

Consider the two dreams of warning.

In **Matthew 2:12** we read of the wise men: *"And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way."* The wise men were warned by God that Herod had evil purposes – he wished to destroy Jesus. They obeyed, and were blessed.

Then in **Matthew 27:19**, we read about Pontius Pilate sitting down to judge Jesus Christ: *"When he was set down on the judgment seat, his wife sent unto him, saying, 'Have thou nothing to do with that just man: for I have suffered many things this day in a dream because of him.'"* Pilate's wife received a dream which warned her that Pilate should not condemn Jesus. Unlike the wise men, he rejected the counsel, and went ahead with condemning Jesus.

At Christ's birth, a dream caused wise men to continue to be wise, and at His death, a dream did not prevent a fool from being foolish. Jesus was born to die.

Consider Christ's clothing.

In **Luke 2:7** we read: *"And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn."* As a baby, Christ was wrapped in swaddling clothes – simple, bandage-like material that just covered Him. His very humble clothing at birth foreshadowed what would happen to Him at death.

Christ did not die with a glorious kingly robe on. **Matthew 27:35** tells us what happened to His clothes on the day of His crucifixion: *"And they crucified him, and parted his garments."* Even His very basic garments were stripped from Him, and He was crucified without them – adding to the terrible shame and humiliation that was crucifixion.

At birth, He was wrapped in swaddling clothes. At death, He was stripped naked, and His garments were gambled for.

Consider the reversal of caretaking roles.

There at His birth is Jesus, being nursed by Mary. As she lays Him in a manger, we can imagine the awe and wonder in both Mary and Joseph's eyes as they behold and care for a baby conceived by the Holy Spirit Himself. There they are, in the most humble of circumstances, in a smelly, dirty stable, staring at a miracle, staring at the Messiah.

Thirty-three years later, on the day of His death, the scene is different. Joseph is absent, we assume he has died sometime during Christ's youth. The firstborn son had the responsibility of taking care of His widowed mother. There, dying on the cross, listen to the exchange recorded:

When Jesus therefore saw His mother, and the disciple standing by, whom He loved, He saith unto His mother, 'Woman, behold thy son!' Then saith He to the disciple, 'Behold thy mother!' And from that hour that disciple took her unto his own home.

John 19:26-27

Jesus sees His heartbroken mother standing at the cross. She is experiencing the heart-wrenching pain that many have experienced – to behold both the birth and the death of her child. Knowing she needs to be taken care of, He reassures her, essentially saying, 'John is now going to fulfil my role of taking care of you.' And to John, he says, 'Take care of my mother.'

The scene is touching beyond words. A dying Jesus – making sure His mother is taken care of. At His birth, Mary took care of Him. At His death, He took care of her.

Consider the role of angels in His birth and death.

The flurry of angelic activity preceding His birth is unmatched in the Bible. Gabriel appears to Zacharias announcing the coming birth of John. Gabriel appears to Mary announcing the birth of Jesus the Messiah. An angel appears to Joseph, encouraging him not to divorce Mary, and explaining to Him the miraculous circumstances of Christ's conception.

Then angels appear to the shepherds, announcing His birth, and directing them to Bethlehem. After His birth, another angel appears to Joseph in a dream instructing him to go to Egypt to survive the coming massacre of infants. Another angel appears telling him to return some time later. No less than six angelic appearances surround the birth of Jesus Christ.

And then we come to the death of Christ – and the angels are silent. No angels appear threatening the Roman soldiers. No angels rescue Him while He is being punched and kicked and spat on and whipped and his beard pulled out. There is no singing now. The silence is deafening. The flag of heaven is at half-mast so to speak, as millions and millions of hosts behold in wonder – their Creator willingly dies for His enemies.

Oh, there is no doubt they were available. Christ told the over-zealous Peter in the Garden of Gethsemane after he had cut off the ear of the servant of the High Priest: *"Thinkest thou that I cannot now pray to my Father, and He shall presently give me more than twelve legions of angels?"* (**Matthew 26:53**). Thousands upon thousands of angels could have swiftly dealt with the rag-tag bunch of Jewish rulers, or even the crack legionaries of the Roman empire.

Perhaps, our sanctified imagination can picture the angels almost bursting at the bit to punish these wicked, perverse humans. Perhaps we can see only the very hand of God holding back His servants, eager to defend the honour and name and glory of the King and Creator Jesus Christ.

And so the silence of the angels on the day of His death is not reluctance or indifference on their part. It is grace – the restraining hand of God – as He passionately pursues the redemption of man. The silence is perhaps even the tears of angels, as they behold the greatest travesty of all time, and yet the greatest act of mercy of all time. **1 Peter 1:12** tells us angels long to look into these matters of salvation. It fascinates them.

At His birth, their presence was for all to see. At His death, they were seemingly absent. He was born to die.

Consider the contrasting situations of light and darkness.

And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling clothes, and laid Him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn. And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the

angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, 'Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.'

Luke 2:7-10

Here we have a night-time scene which is illuminated by the great light of the glory of the Lord. We see the same thing repeated with the wise men:

When they had heard the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy. And when they were come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down, and worshipped Him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto Him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh.

Matthew 2:9-11

This probably isn't the same night as the night of his birth. But since they were in Bethlehem still, and Joseph's home town was Nazareth, it must have been shortly afterwards. They are no longer in the stable, they are in a house. Nevertheless, the situation is similar. They had been observing some kind of light, given by God to illuminate them.

On the day of His death, the situation is reversed. We read in **Mathew 27:45**: "*Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land unto the ninth hour.*" Whereas Christ's birth seems to have been at night, and light shone around the shepherds, His death was during the day, and darkness came upon the land in the middle of the day from 12 pm until 3 pm.

His birth was a day of great illumination, of great hope. The day of His death – though it was this hope now being lived out – was a day of great darkness. The sins of the world were being laid on the Creator of the world. God the Father was turning from God the Son. The anger of God over sin was being poured out. But that rejoicing on the day of His birth was really about what the day of His death would accomplish. He was born to die.

Consider who came to see Him.

At His birth, Jesus was visited by shepherds. "*And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds*" (**Luke 2:16-18**). God loves to include shepherds in His Word. They seem to illustrate so much of the heart of God.

It's also interesting who the first invited guests to behold the newly-born Son of God are. Not the rulers of Israel. Not the statesmen, the military rulers, the philosophers, the Pharisees, the Sadducees or the scribes. Shepherds –one of the most humble professions in Israel. The lowest of the low, the bottom of the social ladder in Israel, was a shepherd. And these God delights to share the news with first. They have the privilege of beholding His glory first.

On the day of His death, the situation is quite different. Surrounding Christ on the cross are no humble shepherds. *“Likewise also the chief priests mocking Him, with the scribes and elders, said, He saved others; Himself He cannot save. If He be the King of Israel, let Him now come down from the cross, and we will believe Him” (Matthew 27:41-42).*

The bottom of Israel's social order attended His birth, the highest of Israel's social order attended His death. Humble shepherds came to see Him being born. In faith, they believed in Him, and declared it to others. At His death, proud religious rulers came to see Him, and mocked Him.

Interestingly, **Luke 23:48** tells us the reaction to His death: *“And all the people that came together to that sight, beholding the things which were done, smote their breasts, and returned.”* No one ultimately rejoiced in His death. His birth was a day of rejoicing by the humble. His death was a day of mourning for the humble and the proud.

Consider the place of His birth and the place of His death.

He was born in Bethlehem. The prophecy of Micah had declared this would happen. *“But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting” (Micah 5:2).* Bethlehem was not a large, thriving city. It was small, one of the smallest. It was this smallness that God again delighted in.

Where ought the King of Israel to be born? Surely the capital of Israel. Surely near the hub of religious activity. Picture the head of the Sanhedrin bringing out the baby Messiah to the cheering thousands awaiting outside. This is how Israel had envisaged it. Instead, God wanted Jesus to be born in a one-horse town called Bethlehem, in a stable, because there was no room at the inn. He was born in Bethlehem, the quaint home town of David.

However, His death was just outside the City of David – Jerusalem. The contrast could not be stronger. His birth was quiet, almost secret. His death was public, during a feast when hundreds of thousands of people were in Jerusalem. His death was in the capital of Israel, the city of Zion. At birth, Jesus was anonymous. At death, He was infamous.

Consider the two different Herods.

At His birth, Herod the Great was ruler. This Herod wanted to destroy any opposition to His throne, so tried to use the wise men to trace Jesus so that he could kill Him. He ordered the murder of all the infants in Bethlehem and the surrounds. When Christ was born, a king Herod tried to kill Him. When Christ died, it was a different Herod on the throne. This was Herod Antipas, the one who killed John the Baptist. We read the following:

And when Herod saw Jesus, he was exceeding glad: for he was desirous to see Him of a long season, because he had heard many things of Him; and he hoped to have seen some miracle done by Him. Then he questioned with Him in many words; but He answered him nothing. And the chief priests and scribes stood and vehemently accused Him. And Herod with his men

of war set Him at nought, and mocked Him, and arrayed Him in a gorgeous robe, and sent Him again to Pilate.

Luke 23:8-11

This Herod did not try and kill Jesus, He tried to use Jesus for entertainment – He wanted to see a miracle. Jesus did not answer any of his questions. Eventually, his men humiliated Jesus and put a beautiful robe on Him – another mocking gesture. At His birth, one Herod tried to kill Him. At His death, another Herod tried to use Him.

Time would fail us to list all of the similarities, contrasts and parallels between the day of Christ's birth and the day of His death. Why did God include these in the Word?

Perhaps because He knew there was coming a time when people would idolise His birth, and try to forget about His death. Perhaps because He wanted the birth and death of Christ to be so integrally tied up that you cannot honestly look at the one without looking at the other. Perhaps He meant for a man to rejoice over Christmas only if he had received Christ.

If one rejects Christ as Lord and Saviour, the message of His birth is no longer good news, it is terrifying news. It means the God of this universe takes sin so seriously that He gave up His own Son to pay the price for it. It therefore means that to reject Him is to reject the greatest thing God has ever done – and hence to incur the greatest wrath of God imaginable.

If we are truly to rejoice in the birth of Christ, we must be rejoicing in the reason for His birth – to die for our sins. Joy and gladness are not so much in the birth of Jesus itself – though there is much joy in that – as they are in what that Birth meant: an offer of repentance and faith in His name for the forgiveness of sins, for reconciliation.

With that thought, we join in with the angels' chorus recorded in **Luke 2:14**: *"Glory to God in the highest, and on Earth peace, goodwill toward men."*