"‘Twas the Night Before Christmas” – Heb. 10:5-7

“Therefore, when He came into the world, He said: ‘Sacrifice and offering You did not desire, but a body You have prepared for Me. In burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin You had no pleasure.’ Then I said, ‘Behold, I have come — In the volume of the book it is written of Me — to do Your will, O God.’” (NKJV)

That is why Christ said as he came into the world, “O God, the blood of bulls and goats cannot satisfy you, so you have made ready this body of mine for me to lay as a sacrifice upon your altar. You were not satisfied with the animal sacrifices, slain and burnt before you as offerings for sin. Then I said, ‘See, I have come to do your will, to lay down my life, just as the Scriptures said that I would.’” (Heb. 10:5-7 LB)

The NLT has it, “That is why, when Christ came into the world, he said to God ...”

I’m sure most of us are familiar with the famous poem by Clement Moore that begins this way:

'Twas the night before Christmas when all through the house
Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse.
The stockings were hung by the chimney with care,
In hopes that St. Nicholas soon would be there.

In many homes this has become a Christmas tradition. I remember hearing it read at school when I was a little boy, and I’ve heard it read many times since then on various Christmas TV specials. I’ve memorized it, and often recited it as a story to my boys and my grandkids.

If we take the title of Clement Moore’s poem we are presented with a very good Christmas Eve question: What happened the night before Christmas? More pointedly, what was happening in heaven as Jesus was being born on the earth? What was on Jesus’ mind as He was enveloping Himself in human flesh?

That may just be a rhetorical or academic question open to all kinds of insights, were it not for the fact that the Bible tells us what was on the Son’s mind as He was donning flesh and blood.

You may not know this part of the Christmas story. We know of course about the angels and the shepherds and we know about Caesar’s decree that led to Mary and Joseph’s journey to Bethlehem. We know about the manger and the Wise Men and the star that led them from the east. We even know about Herod’s evil plan to kill the baby Jesus. But this is a part of the Christmas story you may not know.

What was on our Lord’s mind as He was being born? You may be surprised to know that the Bible actually gives us an answer to that question. Hebrews 10:5-7 gives us a prayer of Jesus as He was coming into the world. It is the declaration of the eternal Son of God as He stepped out of heaven and entered this world through a virgin’s womb.

This is the Christmas story according to Jesus Christ. We know Luke’s version and Matthew’s version. In Hebrews 10:5-7 we get the Christmas story from the heart of Jesus Christ. This is what He was thinking the “night before Christmas” some 2000 years ago.

Hebrews 10:5-7 quotes Psalm 40:6-8 and applies it directly to the coming of Christ. If we want to know what Christ was thinking before He was born, these verses provide a glimpse: Therefore, as He was coming into the world, He said: You did not want sacrifice and offering, but You prepared a body for Me. You did not delight in whole burnt offerings and sin offerings. Then I said, “See— it is written about Me in the volume of the scroll— I have come to do Your will, God!”

What does our Lord emphasize in these verses?

He Did Not Begin at Bethlehem

They tell us first of all that our Lord’s existence did not begin at Bethlehem. Verse 5 stresses that fact when it attributes these words to Christ “as he was coming into the world.” They speak to us of the preexistence of Christ in heaven.
When I was a young man, I heard a preacher explain this great truth by speaking of the “councils of eternity.” He meant by that the divine agreement among the Father, Son and Holy Spirit that the Son would enter the human race and offer Himself as Savior.

This is a teachable moment regarding the Trinity. I won’t go into this in detail right now, but suffice it to say that we worship ONE God who reveals Himself in Three Persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God is one, but He is also three. All three persons in the Godhead are all eternal and coexistent. All three were involved in creation, salvation, and all major doctrines we hold dear.

Most pointedly for us this morning, you need to understand that the eternal Son of God did not begin His existence when Jesus was born in Bethlehem. As the second Person of the Trinity, He had no “beginning.” That’s what Jesus meant when He declared, “Before Abraham was, I am.” (John 8:58) The Son existed eternally with the Father and the Spirit.

Someone asked me recently why the birth of Christ is recorded only in Matthew and Luke but not in Mark and John. The answer goes back to the purpose of those two gospels. Mark wants to emphasize Christ as the great servant who came to give His life for others. In that context it does not matter where a servant comes from, only who sent Him and how He serves others. By contrast John’s gospel goes back to the ultimate beginning, far beyond Bethlehem. It starts with the eternal preexistence of Jesus as the true Word of God: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” (John 1:1)

There are many mysteries to all of this, but let us remember one important fact. Christmas marks the human birth of the Lord Jesus Christ, but it does not mark the beginning of Christ’s existence. As the Son of God, He existed with the God the Father and God the Holy Spirit long before He was conceived in Mary’s womb.

Many use the term “Christ” to refer to the Son of God in His eternal state, and to “Jesus” as God become flesh. However you distinguish it, just know this first and foremost: God the Son is eternal and has no beginning or end. He became a human being at the birth of Jesus, lived, died, rose again and ascended back to the Father from where He came.

He Came to Take Away Our Sins

Second, from before the beginning of His earthly life, there was a purpose Christ served in the eternal plan of salvation. What is clear from this passage is that He came with that purpose clearly on His mind and in His heart.

He came to replace the failed Jewish system of animal sacrifice. I say “failed” not in the sense that it failed to do what it was designed to do. It did! But it was never designed to do what Jesus did! The sacrificial system was given that the blood of the animals offered on the altar would “cover” the sins of believers. When Jesus Christ shed His blood, it was not to cover sins … it was to remove sins! How? His blood transforms the hearts of those it covers.

Verse 5 says it very explicitly: “You did not want sacrifice and offering.” That would have come as a shock to the Jewish priests who for centuries had offered bulls and goats as God had prescribed in the Old Testament. They did that because they sincerely believed that is what God wanted from them. And it was. They were not wrong in what they did, but they did not understand the truth of Hebrews 10:4, “For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.” Only the blood of the eternal Lamb of God would do that.

Drop down to verse 11 and you can grasp the futility of the old system: “Every priest stands day after day ministering and offering the same sacrifices time after time, which can never take away sins.”

Priests in the Old Testament spent their days in a routine of sacrifice and offerings—one after the other, morning, noon and night, day in and day out, week in and week out, month in and month out, year after year, decade after decade, century after century.

During the 1500 years from the time of Moses to the time of Christ, tens of thousands of lambs and goats and bulls were offered on the altar before God to make atonement for the sins of the people.
That’s what he means when he says “day after day” and “time after time” the same sacrifices were offered.

Suppose you took all the blood offered on all the Jewish altars, over all those centuries, offered by priests doing God’s will, obeying God’s law, and sincerely doing what God told them to do, sacrificing bulls and goats until there was a river of blood flowing from the altar. What does all that animal blood amount to? How many sins could it forgive? Not one! That’s a shocking fact, a stunning reality, and a sobering truth. All that blood would cover a lot of sins, but not remove a single one.

That’s entirely right. **Jesus came to do what the animal sacrifices could never do.** He came to deal with our sin once and for all. When Jesus died on the Cross, He made salvation possible once and for all. Listen to how the writer of Hebrews describes that redemption:

“For such a High Priest was fitting for us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and has become higher than the heavens; who does not need daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the people’s, for this He did once for all when He offered up Himself.” (Heb. 7:26-27)

“Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption.” (9:12)

“By that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.” (10:10)

Did you get that “once and for all?” Now put these pieces together. On the night before Christmas, as Christ was coming into the world, His prayer to the Father was that He would fulfill in His body the sacrifice that would take away the sins of the world!

We can see this in Hebrews 10:5, “You prepared a body for me.” On one level this means that Christ’s birth was no afterthought in God’s plan, but the fulfillment of all the promises made in the Old Testament.

At a deeper level it means that His body was prepared for Him so that years later He could offer Himself as the once-for-all sacrifice for sin when He died on the cross. Just as the lamb was prepared for sacrifice, Jesus came as the Lamb of God to take away our sin.

This is what was going on in the Godhead the night before Christmas.

**He Came to Do God’s Will**

When that great Baptist preacher James Montgomery Boice preached on this text (see The Christ of Christmas, pp. 17-26), he pointed out that Christ came into the world knowing His purpose from the beginning. **That could not be said of any other baby.** Christ came to do God’s will.

I sit here at Christmastime thinking about our seven grandchildren and wondering what God has in store for them. When I pray for them, I ask God to keep them safe and healthy, and I pray they will grow up to love and serve the Lord. But I do not know what God has called them to do. Each one has a place in God’s plan, but I do not know how that will work itself out in the years to come. It is unlikely that I will live long enough to see everything God has in store for them. That means I pray for them based on the promises of God, leaving the outworking of the details in His hands.

We came to the 4:00 presentation of the Youth musical, enjoyed supper with them, and hurried to Antioch for their Christmas musical. Both our grandchildren hugged us, but Ethan was consumed with a friend. Kara climbed in my lap as the program started. As the music began, I held her, humming along with the musical. She drifted off to sleep. Her mother commented that she never goes to sleep at church. I told her, “Deanna … I am a professional preacher … I can put anyone to sleep!”

As I held Kara, our youngest grandchild, and I do not know all that God has for her. At this tender moment in her life, she does not know either. But by contrast our Lord Jesus Christ knew His destiny from the very beginning. He knew it before the beginning. He knew it as He was coming into flesh and blood. He came to do God’s will.

Parents often have plans for their children. A farmer may hope his sons take over his farm someday. A business owner may dream that his sons and daughters will join him in his business when
they are old enough. Very often parents hope that their children will attend a certain college and follow in their steps.

These hopes, while understandable, are nothing more than that—the hopes of parents who dream good things for their children. But those dreams oftentimes do not come to pass. Children often go their own way. They choose a different school. They choose a different career. They aren’t interested in the family business. Sadly enough, they occasionally abandon the faith they have been taught from childhood.

Christ was not like that at all. Even as an infant, He knew He had come for a purpose. It is not as if the Father had to convince the Son, “Now I want you to go down there, be born of a virgin, be laid in a feeding trough, forgotten by the world, have Herod attempt to kill you, flee with your parents to Egypt, grow up in Nazareth, be rejected by your own people, be hated, reviled, scourged and then crucified.”

The Son knew all of that before He was born. **Now hear this: He came anyway!** He came to do God’s will, knowing that it would mean His own bloody death on the cross, and He came anyway!

Have you ever heard Amy Grant’s version of a beautiful Christmas song called **Welcome to Our World**? It explains as well as words could how desperately we need Christ to come. In the final stanza, the lyrics connect the cradle and the cross: “Fragile finger sent to heal us, tender brow prepared for thorn. Tiny heart whose blood will save us, unto us is born … Unto us is born. So wrap our injured flesh around You, breathe our air and walk our sod. Rob our sin and make us holy, Perfect Son of God. Welcome to our world.”

**Christ came to earth with a definite purpose—to do God’s will.** He fulfilled that will when He died on the cross, bearing the sins of the world. That’s the ultimate meaning of the angelic proclamation in Luke 2:11, “For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord.” Christ came to be our savior. He came to die! Nothing else explains His birth.

He perfectly fulfilled God’s will when no one else could do it.

—As a man He died.

—As God He bore the sin of the world.

**No one else could have done what Jesus did.** No one else was qualified. No one else was willing. No one else was available. Those truths were on His mind on the night before Christmas.

Harry Ironside often enjoyed telling a story about Czar Nicholas I of Russia. It seems that the czar had a good friend who asked him to provide a job for his son. This the czar did, appointing the son as paymaster for a barracks in the Russian army.

However, it turned out that the son was morally weak and soon gambled away nearly all the money entrusted to him. When the word came that the auditors were going to examine his records, the young man despaired, knowing that he was certain to be found out. He calculated the amount he owed and the total came to a huge debt—far greater than he could ever pay. He determined that the night before the auditors arrived, he would take his gun and commit suicide at midnight.

Before going to bed, he wrote out a full confession, listing all he had stolen, writing underneath these words, “A great debt! Who can pay?” Then weary from his exertions, he fell asleep.

Late that night the czar himself paid a surprise visit to the barracks, as was his occasional custom. Seeing a light on, he peered into the room and found the young man asleep with the letter of confession next to him. He read the letter and instantly understood what had happened. He paused for a moment, considering what punishment to impose, then he bent over, wrote one word on the paper, and left.

Eventually the young man woke up, realizing that he had slept past midnight. Taking his gun, he prepared to kill himself when he noticed that someone had written something on the ledger. Under his words “A great debt! Who can pay?” he saw one word: “Nicholas.”

He was dumbfounded and then terrified when he realized that the czar knew what he had done. Checking his records, he found that the signature was genuine. Finally the thought settled in his mind that the czar knew the whole story and was willing to pay the debt himself. Resting on the words of his commander-in-chief, he fell asleep. In the morning a messenger came from the palace with the exact amount the young man owed. Only the czar could pay. And the czar did pay.
Only Jesus could pay our debt to God. You have probably heard the saying, “He paid a debt he didn’t owe, because I owed a debt I couldn’t pay.” That and that alone explains why “the Word became flesh and lived among us.” (John 1:14) He pitched His tent with us for 33 years that He might pay in His own blood the debt we owed because of our sin.

We stand today precisely where that young man did. When we look at our sins and realize our hopeless condition, we say, “A great debt. Who can pay?” Then the Lord Jesus Christ steps forward and signs His name to our ledger: “Jesus Christ.” Only Jesus could pay. And He does.

This is why He came. This is the real meaning of Christmas. When Christmas arrives, families gather to open their gifts. That is wonderful! But please know that God has a Christmas gift for you—wrapped not in bright paper and with fancy ribbon—but in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. It is the gift of His Son. It is for you. The gift is still there. It must be personally received.

Have you received God’s Christmas gift? You can never truly enjoy Christmas until you can look in the Father’s face and tell Him you have received His Christmas gift. Have you done that?

Perhaps you’ve heard these words by Christina Rossetti.

What shall I give him, Poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I’d give him a lamb.
If I were a wise man, I’d do my part.
What shall I give him, I’ll give him my heart.

Have you ever done that? Have you ever given Him your heart? No decision is more important. No one else can make it for you. If you aren’t ready, then nothing I say can compel you to come to Christ. But if you are ready, then it’s time for you to do business with the Lord. No decision is more important.

The Bible says that, “he gave the right to become God’s children to everyone who believed in him.” (John 1:12 GW) Have you ever received Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord? Would you like to do that right now?

If you answer “Yes” to that question, here’s a simple prayer that may help express the desire of your heart: "Dear God, I know that I am sinner. I confess that I have sinned many times in word and deed. Here and now, I confess my sins and ask Jesus Christ to be my Savior. I believe that Jesus died on the cross for me and rose from the dead on the third day. With all my heart, I am trusting Jesus alone for my salvation. Please forgive my sins and save me. Come into my heart, Lord Jesus, and make me a brand-new person. These things I ask in Jesus’ name, Amen.”