

“A Cradle and a Cross”
 Hebrews 2:14-15
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Have you ever received a printed invitation to a wedding anniversary celebration?

I'm thinking of the ones where they have a picture of the couple at their wedding and another of them now – 25 or so years later.

Have you ever seen one where it is the wedding picture and then 50 or 75 years later?

In addition to the, shall we say, sharp contrast in appearance, what you see is an entire lifetime collapsed into two pictures.

Author James Michner in his novels, such as *Centennial*, *Hawaii*, and *The Covenant*, captures hundreds of years of a people's history in a few hundred pages.

On this Christmas Sunday morning I want you capture a sense of the sweep of Jesus' history in just four scenes – left to right.

I start with the second, a picture of the manger-cradle in Bethlehem.

You know it from a thousand pictures and many Christmases.

In it, see a baby boy – “They will call him Immanuel,” -- which means, “God with us.” (Matthew 1:23)

To the right of that picture, I want you to see the third, a hill outside Jerusalem whereon stand three crosses.

Picture the center cross and the man hanging on it – his name is Immanuel, which means “God with us.”

In the cradle and on the cross you see the same man changed only by 30 years.

Holding those two pictures in your minds, I want you to see two more.

- One preceding the cradle scene, before it in time.
- The other following the cross scene, picturing what is yet to come.

The picture on your far left, before the Cradle scene, is difficult to get in focus because we are trying to see the un-seeable.

It is the same person as in the cradle and on the cross but before, before he became a human being.

Because he is Spirit we cannot see him at all but we can see the effects of his presence.

He spoke, "Let there be light."

And into nothingness burst the incredible energy of a trillion, trillion stars and the great expanse of a seemingly infinite universe.

He spoke, "Let us make man in our image."

And onto one planet, around one of those stars, in one of those galaxies, a man and a woman appeared.

The Bible says of the One who spoke: "By him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. ¹⁷ He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. Colossians 1:16-17

So in the first of our four pictures what do we see? Creator!
In the first frame is Creator. Next is the Cradle. Third is the Cross.

And now on your far right is a fourth and final picture – a Crown.

This fourth picture is yet to be.

The Apostle John wrote: "I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True... on his head are many crowns... The armies of heaven were following him... He has this name... KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS. Revelation 19

And the Apostle Peter said, we "will have to give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead. 1 Peter 4:5

There you have them – four scenes, all the same person:
Creator, Cradle, Cross and Crown.

Most of humanity for most of history has seen and believed some form of the first and last pictures before us – the Creator and Crown.

They have believed in some creative god or force that brought everything into being and they have believed that they stand somehow accountable to that god or force for their conduct while alive.

But what makes Christianity particularly unique among all the religions and philosophies of the world are the two center pictures – the cradle and the cross – the person and work of Jesus – who he is and what he has done.

In the Bible book of Hebrews there are two verses that capture the significance of the Jesus of these two scenes of Cradle and Cross.

Hebrews 2:14-15

“Since the (people of God) have flesh and blood, he (Jesus) too **shared in their humanity** so that by **his death** he might destroy him who holds the power of death--that is, the devil--and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.

All of life is somewhat haunted by the future.

I say “haunted” because the future troubles most people.

The future looms large even in the present – it influences and even controls.

It both invites and repels at the same time.

From early childhood on, we live with an anticipation of and yet a fear of the future, especially the future we cannot see.

Oh, we can see tomorrow, or so we think, and it doesn't trouble us too much.

But we can't see past this life and when we think of it, that brings a certain fear.

About a year ago my, then five-year-old son heard that someone had died of old age.

With a look of concern on his face, he asked, “Papa, are you old?” I said, “no.” (Everything is relative, okay?)

Even though he has experienced no loss through death, he still has a latent fear.

Woody Allen said, "It's not that I'm afraid to die, I just don't want to be there when it happens."

I know that Christmas is about a baby, about his birth, about life and joy.

But what gives this particular baby's birth significance is the greater context of life and death.

As I have said, death is always with us and we cannot escape it.

Many years ago, Somerset Maugham told the story of a servant and his master, from Samarra, who were in Baghdad near the market.

The servant said, "Master, just now when I was in the marketplace I was jostled by a woman in the crowd, and when I turned I saw that it was death that jostled me.

"She looked at me and made a threatening gesture.

"Now lend me your horse and I will ride away from this city and avoid my fate. I will go to Samarra and there Death will not find me."

The merchant lent him his horse, and the servant mounted it, and he dug his spurs in its flanks and as fast as the horse could gallop, he went.

When the merchant went down to the market he saw Death standing in the crowd and he came to Death and said, "Why did you make a threatening gesture to my servant when you saw him this morning?"

"That was not a threatening gesture," Death said, "It was only a start of surprise.

"I was astonished to see him in Baghdad, for I have an appointment with him in Samarra tonight." (In

"Appointment in Samarra" in Robert E. Neale, *The Art of Dying* 22-23)

We fear death because it brings loss and uncertainty.

So strong is our aversion to the losses and unknowns of death that Dylan Thomas wrote, “Do not go gently into that... night; old age should burn and rave at close of day; rage, rage, against the dying of light.”

Oh sure we can rage against death or we can deny it but most of us know that such responses only attempt to obscure reality
Isn't it true that nearly every religion and philosophy is an attempt at dealing with the losses and unknowns of life and death?

The Bible, in Hebrews 2:15, says the Cradle and the Cross are to **“free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.”**

I know that most religions and philosophies are complex systems of belief but at root they deal with one issue – How do we deal with our existence? “Who am I” and “What is to become of me?”

She's fifteen and has been reared in a devout Hindu home.

- She knows that her present circumstances in life were determined by her previous life.
- But if she lives righteously; avoiding lying and injury to others and if she acts charitably, gives money to the priests for the right prayers to be said, and makes pilgrimage to the holy sites, she might be able to improve her position in her next life on earth.
- And if, in the next life or some life after that, she keeps building up sufficient merit (karma) she may one day be assumed into a great blissful oneness with the universe.
- But if she does not build sufficient merit she may be forever assigned to one hard life after another.
- For her, death holds the fearful possibility of migration downward into greater suffering in her next life to pay for her sins of this life.

He's 26 and a Muslim.

- He believes that God breathes the potential for good or evil actions, into every person at birth.
It is his responsibility to choose good over evil.
- He must recite the “sha’hadah” - “There is no god but Allah and Mohammed is the messenger of Allah.”
- He must say the prescribed daily prayers, give to charity, fast during Ramadan and, if physically and financially able, he must make a pilgrimage to Mecca.
- If he chooses well all his life, on judgment day Allah will reward him with Paradise but if his sins outweigh his good deeds he will be damned for eternity.
- He cannot know what his future will be – the fear of death enslaves him.

She’s 73 and has been a Mormon all her life.

- She was baptized and had hands laid on her by the church officials.
- She has fulfilled her duty as a woman to bear children and give physical bodies to as many spirits as she can.
- She is a member of the church and tithes regularly.
- And she has given much of her life to “temple work.”
- She hopes she has not ever committed an unforgivable sin and that when she dies she will be rewarded by going immediately to the “celestial,” the third and highest heaven.
- But if she has missed it somehow in this life, she will be assigned a purgatory type place where she will be punished for a while for her sins.
- Death brings a real fear of the future.
- Her god is a hard task-master and while she hopes, she does not know what her future will be.

(See Ankerberg and Weldon [Everything You Ever Wanted to Know about Mormonism](#))

I could go on with religion after religion, philosophy after philosophy.

- Each offers the same non-hope for the future.
- Each enslaves its adherents by fear.

In the past three hundred years there have been a growing number of people who have held that there is no God and thus there is no life after death.

Educational philosopher, John Dewey said, “Man is capable, if he will but exercise the required courage, intelligence and effort, of shaping his own fate.” (John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, 47-49)

Muster all the courage you can but when you think that death ends it all, what a frightening prospect that is!
If the secularists are right life has no meaning, which may be the worst fate of all.

But the Cradle and the Cross offer the only alternative of hope to all of those man-made religions and non-religions.

The Cradle and the Cross take the fear (and slavery to fear) out of life and death.

So God says in Hebrews 2:14-15 “Since the (people of God) have flesh and blood, **he too shared in their humanity...**”

The Creator himself came to the Cradle.

Contrary to the teaching of most religions, it is impossible to “make up for” sin against a holy God.

Because of our sins and sinfulness, we are eternally condemned to a life separated from God unless **God** does something.

George Guthrie writes, “We as human beings needed a bridge between deity and humanity that could be built only by one who had experienced fully both sides of the gulf separating us from God.” (George Guthrie, *NIV Application Commentary*, 119)

“Because we are flesh and blood, he too shared in our humanity.”

And so God the Son became also a man.

That’s the miracle of Christmas!

Max Lucato wrote, “Angels watched as Mary changed God’s diapers.” (*God Came Near*, 26)

That’s the Cradle.

But notice Hebrews 2 says, “he shared in (our) humanity so that **by his death** he might destroy him who holds the power of death – that is the devil...”

There’s the Cross.

The sinless God/Man, Jesus, chose to take our humanity **and our sinfulness** on himself.

- And when he took the penalty for our sin by his death for us, he took away Satan's ground of accusation against us.
- We can no longer be held accountable for sin that has been atoned for.
- We stand acquitted because Christ bore the penalty.

The great outcome is that we are accepted by God not by our efforts, either in this life or a next one, but we are accepted solely in Jesus.

And the second great outcome is that we are liberated from the fear of death.

No, it doesn't mean that we don't still have apprehension about the unknown – and there is much about the process of death that we don't know.

But we know the eventual outcome of that process: Jesus said, "Trust in God; trust also in me. ² In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am." John 14:1-3

The Scriptures teach that only by becoming one of us could God remain God and still make us sinners worthy of his eternal presence.

Malcolm Muggeridge captured that truth when he wrote, "As man alone, Jesus could not have saved us; as God alone, he would not; Incarnate (God in flesh), he could and did." (Malcolm Muggeridge, Jesus, The Man Who Lives 30)

The opening words of the book of Hebrews capture all four of our pictures in these few words:

Hebrews 1:1-3

"In **these last days (God) has spoken to us by his Son**

(Cradle), whom he appointed heir of all things, and **through whom he made the universe (Creator)**... After he had **provided purification for sins (Cross)**, he **sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven (Crown)**.

Oh, the one true God is such a different God than the gods of other religions and philosophies – Our God became one of us to save us.

John 3:16

“For God so **loved** the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

Do you believe him?

Will you trust him today?