

Fil-Am Community Church

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Key verse: 1 Peter 2:21-25

“The Christmas Tree”

1 Peter 2:21-25 (NASB)

²¹ For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, ²² WHO COMMITTED NO SIN, NOR WAS ANY DECEIT FOUND IN HIS MOUTH; ²³ and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously; ²⁴ and He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed. ²⁵ For you were continually straying like sheep, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls.

If you happen to live a little further North or West of here, you will see there are millions upon of acres of **all kinds of trees**, but specifically pine trees, and lots of sizes, some with short needles, some with long ones, some tall and lean, others short and stubby. It is what some people would call a Christmas tree paradise.

It happens every year right after Thanksgiving that the music changes in the stores and on the radios, it is like clockwork, the Christmas music comes out. And those trees that grew all year long are now starting to be adorned with balls and bells, glittering tinsel, tiny blinking lights of every color, and figurines surrounding them with bales of hay, and stars and angels on the top of these trees, with a clutter of packages of every shape and size underneath.

This morning I want to talk about the real Christmas tree, not the one in the department stores fully decorated with sparkly ornaments and

blinking lights, but the tree we should not forget about during Christmas. In fact, we might even call it The First Christmas Tree.

It wasn't standing in a palace or in a country cottage, or at the mall of the capital city – but on a hilltop just outside the huge walled ancient city of Jerusalem. It wasn't a green pine tree, nor did it have short or long needles. In fact it was kind of bare, with two branches stretching out both sides of its trunk.

It didn't have balls and bells and tinsel, but it was decorated with a quickly made decoration on the top of it – a piece of dull, brown, ragged parchment with a few words scrawled on it in three languages with a saying written on it: **“Jesus, King of the Jews.”**

There were no colorful, blinking lights; in fact, there was no light at all for several hours because even the sun refused to shine on it that day.

But the tree did display a Gift that was fastened to it by three giant nails. The Gift was a body of a brutally beaten man. And He was decorated on His hands, face, brow and feet with ribbons of crimson blood. And the Gift was signed

“To: Mankind From: God with Love”.

It was an expensive Gift; one that only God could afford to give – the Gift was His only begotten Son.

A beloved friend of this Son of God recorded the Christmas message that was behind this Gift –

“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life.”

A Cousin called this Son of God **“the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world.”**

A close friend, who had denied His friendship three times looked back at this first Christmas Tree and Christmas Gift and wrote

“Who His own self bore our sins in His own body on the tree, so that we being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness, by Whose stripes we are healed.”

There has never been a Christmas tree since that has displayed such a priceless Gift as did this tree on the hilltop of Golgotha. And no Giver has paid such a high price as the One who spared not even His only Son, but freely gave Him up for us all. (Ro. 8:32)

And why such a Gift? So that we could have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, and a life that is dead to sin and alive to righteousness.

We all know what John 3:16 says but look just one verse more and see what it says in John 3:17, For God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world but through him the world might be saved!

At this time of the year, in homes all across America, you will find a Christmas tree with a least a few presents underneath.

Some would say that believers should have nothing to do with Christmas trees because of their pagan origin.

Let's spend a little time this morning looking over the origin of the Christmas tree. Long before the advent of Christianity, plants and trees that remained green all year long had a special meaning for people in winter.

Just as people today decorate their homes during this festive season with, pine, spruce and fir trees, ancient people hung evergreen clusters over their doors and windows.

In many countries it was believed that evergreens would keep away witches, ghosts, evil spirits and illness.

Early **Romans** marked a feast in honor of Saturn, the God of Agriculture. They decorated their temples with evergreens as a symbol of everlasting life.

The **Vikings** thought that evergreens were a special plant from the Sun God, Balder.

In the 16th century **Germany** is credited with starting the Christmas tree tradition, by bringing it into their homes and decorating the trees. It is also believed that the protestant reformer, Martin Luther, added lighted candles to its branches as decorations.

However, most 19th century Americans found Christmas trees as oddity. The first on record was in the 1830's, by German settlers of Pennsylvania. But as late as the 1840's it was still considered as pagan symbol.

The Puritans under their second governor William Bradford tried to stamp out all "**Pagan Mockery**" of the observance and penalized any frivolity.

The influence of Oliver Cromwell preached against the "**Heathen Traditions**" of Christmas carols, decorating trees, and any joyful expression that desecrated the "sacred Event" of Christmas.

In 1659 the general court of Massachusetts erected laws making any observance of December 25th (other than a Church Service) a **penal offense** and people were fined for hanging decorations.

However by the late **1840's** the popularity started to catch on, it was noted that the European tradition was to have a decorated tree that was normally around 4 feet tall, but the American would not be outdone, started the trend of having a tree that went from floor to ceiling.

With all that said, the Christmas tree has become a part of our season and celebration, and its pagan meaning lost long ago, just like the days of our weeks have lost their original pagan meaning.

But from the real tree of Christmas, we can find three things on display for us to stand wonder of His love.

1. Our Pattern (Vs. 21-23)

²¹ For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, ²² WHO COMMITTED NO SIN, NOR WAS ANY DECEIT FOUND IN HIS MOUTH; ²³ and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously

Here Peter recalls the example of the Lord Jesus and sees in the life and death of the Savior, God's standard for all. These verses tell us that on the Tree Jesus died on, He left us a pattern, an example, a template, for how to endure affliction...

He suffered on the tree of Calvary as an Example for us who might find ourselves suffering for righteousness sake, for doing what is right and true.

The pattern was set by Jesus, he always submitted to the fathers will and didn't act on his own agenda, and suffered greatly because of it.

- Jesus didn't get to pursue a great career.
- He didn't have the opportunity to get married and raise a family.
- He didn't get the opportunity to be friends with other Kings or great thinkers of his time.
- He didn't get the worship or adoration that he so richly deserved.

Instead he traveled around in poverty, always looking to meet other people's needs, healing their diseases, being tested constantly by people who hated

him, being alone in the world without a soul mate to call his own. Not to mention the suffering he did during his trial and crucifixion.

Why did he do it? He did it for you, for me, he did it for the ones (us) that rebelled against him, that broke his commands.

He gave up everything for us!

When we actively obey God and our faith is active obedience, it may lead to suffering and difficulties and trials. But the love Jesus showed on the Tree that day was our pattern. He was doing it all from the motive of love!

Love for those who hated and despised Him. We're seeing a lot of those who are willing to suffer and commit suicide for their god, but their motive isn't love, its hate.

Jesus loved, even while suffering on the cross, being reviled but not reviling in return. When they hurled insults at Him, He didn't return insults or threats, but said "Father forgive them for they don't know what they're doing."

Christ's love from the Cross is His pattern for us.

No writer in the Bible ever promised that following Christ would exempt us from suffering, even unjust suffering, and suffering we don't deserve.

If the active obedience of faith leads to suffering, then we are to follow Jesus' example at the Crucifixion.

Peter says Jesus is our Example of suffering for righteousness sake. That word "example" means "a written copy given by our Master Teacher to be carefully followed by His students. It literally means to "write under". It was a writing put under a piece of paper and then traced.

Peter also says we are to "follow in His steps" – or follow His footprints.

Here's what we are to follow in Jesus.

- He committed no sin.
- No deceit was found in His mouth.
- When reviled, He reviled not again, or when insulted He didn't insult back.
- When He suffered He did not threaten but committed Himself to God who judges righteously.

That's the Pattern we are to follow – the pattern of personal innocence, patient submission, and uncomplaining humility – and so should we. He was above reproach in act and word – and so should we. He didn't threaten revenge but left it to God – and so should we.

We're living in a selfish world. It's why we're in the financial straits that we're in in this Country. More than ever we need to be reminded by the real Christmas Tree of Christ's Example from that Tree – His example of life, attitude and speaking.

2. Our Provider. (Vs. 24)

²⁴ and He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed.

The purpose of Christ passion was not only to deliver us from the penalty of sin, but also from the Power of Sin!

Peter tells us that this real Christmas tree should remind us of Christ's provision for us. He bore our sins in His body on the Tree, so that we could be dead to sins and live righteous lives.

After Jesus had been whipped and His back ripped to shreds, He was forced to carry the crosspiece of this rough old tree out of the city, up the hill of Golgotha, on His welted and bleeding and raw back. All of this was done

so that we could have a provision for taking our sins away and for the ability to live a righteous life.

We deserved to suffer the consequences of our sins and all the punishment that goes with sin, but Jesus came into the world at Christmas, took upon Himself the punishment sin deserves so that we could be freed from sin. He's giving us just the opposite of what we deserve and should expect. He's the doctor suffering the cost, the One who is well taking on Himself our sickness so we can be healed – "by His stripes we are healed."

Back in WWI the Prince of Wales was invited to inspect and visit a hospital on the outskirts of London. He was told there were 36 severely wounded men he should visit. He graciously accepted the invitation. Upon arrival the hospital staff took him to the main ward; he shook hands with some, spoke encouraging words to others, and sympathized with them all. Then looking around, he said, "I thought there were 36, but I've only seen 30 men." It was explained to him that six of the very worst cases were in a special ward, not usually visited.

The Prince said "I must see them." So they took him to these bruised, maimed, and physically wrecked men. He visited with them, and thanked them for their sacrifice for the country. But then he said "There are only 5 men here, where is the other man?" they told him that the poor man was so mutilated that he was kept in a room alone and that it would be wiser not to see him.

But the Prince insisted, "I must see him." So they took the Prince of Wales into a room where he saw an unforgettable sight. There lay what remained of a brave soldier. He was blind, deaf, legless, armless, and disfigured, almost beyond recognition as a man.

The Prince stood silent and touched beyond belief. He then stooped down, kissed the veteran's scarred brow, and with a break in his voice explained to the group who surrounded "Wounded for Me, Wounded for Me."

That's what Jesus was born into to this world for – for the purpose of dying and redeeming the whole world, to make a difference in our lives. He has come to make a difference in our lives, to change the direction of our lives, not just add-on to our lives.

Real Christianity Makes a Difference.

Let your Christmas tree remind you of His provision. In the Christmas tree we not only see our pattern and our provision but we see our....

3. Our Preserver (vs. 25)

²⁵ For you were continually straying like sheep, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls.

Jesus is not only our **Pattern** to follow, and our **Provision** for redemption and righteousness, but He is our **Preserver**.

That is indicated by the titles given to Him here – Shepherd and Guardian or Overseer of our souls.

Like Isaiah the prophet, Peter reminds us that our past included being like sheep who have gone astray from truth, from salvation, from holiness, from peace and joy. We were lost from the Father, unprotected from the enemy's schemes, exposed to all kinds of perils, lacking guidance to green pastures, having no guardian to guide, having no goal to reach, straying farther and farther away.

But because Jesus came as Grace and Truth, we can return to find Christ as our Shepherd to lead and feed us, and as our Bishop or Overseer to care and comfort our souls.

There is no better Provider for this great need we have. He is the Greatest Gift that we can receive at Christmas – the Preserver of our souls, who can preserve us for all eternity.

Conclude: Let me close with an illustration that speaks of our Preserver.

Eric Fellman speaks of meeting a Chinese couple in Hong Kong, while traveling to China, “A friend took me down a narrow alley to a second-floor flat to meet a man recently released from prison in China. I knew I would be pressed to carry Bibles and other literature to China and was fearful of getting caught so I tried to mask my fear and hesitation.

A Chinese man in his 60’s opened the door, and his smile was radiant, but his back was very bent over. He led us to a sparsely furnished room. A Chinese woman around the same age came in to serve tea. As she lingered I couldn’t help but notice how they touched and lovingly looked at each other. My apparent staring didn’t go unnoticed, for soon they were both giggling. My tour guide informed me that it was alright because they were newlyweds. They were engaged in 1949, when he was a student at Nanking Seminary. The day of their wedding rehearsal, Chinese communists seized the seminary. They took students to a hard-labor prison. For the next 30 years, the bride-to-be was allowed only one visit per year.

After each of their very brief annual meetings, the man was called to the Wardens office and was told you could go home with your bride to be if you will only “Renounce Christianity”. Year after year the man replied with just one word, “NO”.

I was stunned, how had he been able to stand the strain for so long, being denied his family, his marriage, and even his health? When I asked him, he seemed astonished at the question. He smiled and simply replied, “With all that Jesus has done for me, how could I betray him?”

The next day, I requested that my suitcase be crammed with Bibles and training literature for Chinese Christians. I determined not to lie about the materials, yet lost not one minute of sleep worrying about the consequences. And as God had planned, my suitcases were never inspected. At that point it was more about trusting God as my provider than worrying about what could happen to me.

The saying comes to mind, if God is for us, who can stand against us?

As the praise and worship group comes forward, I would like for you to reflect on the song they are about to sing. It is called the Old Rugged cross, it's a song about redemption, a song about how Christ bore the weight of our sin so we didn't have to, so as we sing this song today, if there is something you need to get off your chest I would ask you to come forward. If you want to leave your troubles and worries behind, you can leave it here with us today. And lastly if you do not have a personal relationship with Christ I would ask you to come, the directors are standing by to pray with you, don't miss the opportunity, you never know when you will get another one.

Would you give Him yourself so that He can give Himself back to you as your **Pattern**, Your **Provider**, and Your **Preserver**?

Let Him become the Shepherd and Overseer of your soul. Place yourself under that tree, because hanging from its branches is the Gift for you and me - Jesus laid His life down on the Perfect Tree.

Let us pray...