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# Christmas: The Burdened Season

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## **CHRISTMAS: THE BURDENED SEASON**

Luke 10:38-42

Ray Granade, December, 2001

In the midst of the hustle and bustle of the season we call Christmas, inspired perhaps by the time of preparation that is Advent but certainly by Tom Greer's comment and by the donkey that carried Mary southward, I have been thinking of the season's burdens. Sometimes those burdens are physical, like that of the donkey who saw one but carried two from Galilee to Bethlehem. Many burdens are those of the psyche, loaded on by the season. Of all the times of the year, this one seems especially to magnify our psychic burdens by its repeated calls to rejoice, enjoy, be happy, be merry. Those around us seem to enter into the season's festivities wholeheartedly, and we wonder why we cannot. Families gather and we are alone, separated by distance or estrangement or circumstance. We wonder what makes our burdens unique, and why we are so cursed as to be set apart from our fellows, seemingly to bear those burdens alone. Those thoughts have led me to view the Christmas story from a different perspective—from that of the burdens shouldered by each character in the tableau, and what we might learn from them.

The Christmas story begins and ends with God. A burden is the Old Testament's central motif. A creature spoils what the Creator pronounced good. Estrangement replaces the Garden's easy companionship. The cacophony of Babel replaces the harmony of the spheres. The Creator, seeking to restore companionship and harmony, makes a trial of a small band of humans and offers them the Law and a Covenant. Repeatedly they break the Covenant; repeatedly He woos them again.

Eventually He offers a new Covenant, an amplification of the old, even though He knows that it too will be oft-rejected, even though He knows the burden of the pain and suffering it will cause. The burden of love is part of His constancy; the refusal to accept love's burden is part of creation's fickleness and search for novelty.

Each traditional character in the tableau likewise bore particular burdens. The first to appear, childless Zacharias and Elizabeth, faced the burdens of age. She was old—as far past the age of childbearing as Sarah before her. She lived at life's edges, marginalized by being a priest's wife but nobody's mother. She had no place when neighbors congregated and contentedly chatted while indulgently watching children play, or when mothers complained about a child's behavior. Before her stretched an old age unsupported by husband or children. Zacharias bore a related burden. He had not cared for Elizabeth well enough; he knew her fate when, in the natural order of things, he predeceased her. If God had not provided while Zacharias still lived by answering their fervent prayers for progeny, how could he expect God to care for her after his death? He faced the despair of helplessness while a loved one suffered. Both faced a life of dwindling possibilities, all bleak. Both faced the question of what sin on their part precluded children, and each must have wondered if the sin lay with self or spouse. Both faced the infirmities that age brings. Both faced a crisis of faith, one summed up in Zacharias' questioning response to Gabriel.

The second couple is a young one. Where Zacharias and Elizabeth had years of wedded, though childless, life behind them, Joseph and Mary were only part-way through the process from arrangement through the traditional year's betrothal to marriage. A child herself,

Mary had been made a woman by God and circumstance; she was unmarried but pregnant. She faced the burden of social stigma in a small-town setting and the additional burden of not being able to mitigate the inevitable ostracism and even potential death by telling her story. Luke's recitation hints that she did not even tell Joseph initially, and certainly she must have wrestled with exactly what she should say to him when she faced the necessity of revealing her pregnancy. The uncertainties about marrying had been replaced by the uncertainty of whether or not the marriage would even happen. Later she faced the physical burden of carrying a child, and of journeying very shortly before delivery. Most of all, she faced the burden of life's unfairness at a time when she should have been flush with youth's dreams and idealism.

As the other half of the couple, Joseph shared some of Mary's burdens and shouldered some of his own. Like Mary, he had been burdened with the usual concerns surrounding marriage and assuming new responsibilities. He had to decide whether or not to complete the marriage process once the pregnancy had been discovered. He had already decided to be compassionate and divorce Mary quietly rather than in a trial that would have led to her death by stoning; then he faced the burden of changing his mind and the need to go beyond compassion to obedience. He had to face those who thought he had fathered Mary's child as well as those who figured he hadn't, and like Mary could tell no one of his own visitation.

The third set of characters, the unnumbered shepherds, likewise bore burdens. They faced the stigma attached to their occupation and the difficulties inherent in their undertaking. Their lives had rewards,

but they were few in a physically grueling world. Once the angels appeared, they faced the burden of choice: should they leave their charges and seek the Child; or should they ignore the call to irresponsibility and follow the comfortable routine with its known dangers and rewards?

The final set of characters, the Magi, endured the usual burdens of travel, but carried others as well. In an era when travel was more chancy and time-consuming, they faced a considerable investment of time in their journey, time away from families and their usual pursuits on a quest that would eventually take at least four years. They were burdened with the journey's cost, with carrying enough money to supply their needs over time. They were also burdened with finding, carrying, and safeguarding the perfect gift—a gift fit for royalty. Finally, they were burdened with the uncertainty that accompanies scholarly findings whether the work is art or science.

In addition to the sets of characters, the tableau also offers a look at individuals whose bit parts reveal their burdens. King Herod illustrated the verity of Shakespeare's observation "uneasy lies the head that wears the crown," for he suffered the dual burden of power and paranoia—a burden enhanced by its lack of mitigation by grace or mercy. The other such part, played by the Innkeeper, is a problematic study of the burden of greed or compassion. He was either unwilling to turn away custom so long as he had any space at all left to let, or he pitied the young travelers and did what he could to provide them shelter. Certainly he was burdened by excess clientele and the demands that peak season always imposes on those in the service sector.

It would be simple to turn this into a morality play, and let the characters represent various of the Seven Deadly Sins and Seven Cardinal Virtues. That could be done without violating the story, but that is not now my concern. What concerns me is the commonality of their burdens, a commonality they share with all humanity and especially with us at this particular season. I see mirrored in them the burdens I see carried around me everywhere I look this season. Instead of resembling Santa's bag, the sacks that people carry appear to be the burlap ones of my youth, in which the poor carried all manner of things better left unexamined and unremarked.

What is at once the season's most hopeless and most hopeful sign appears when I look at the manger and the last figure in the tableau. There lies the Child, but His hand clutches an outsize burlap sack, the biggest I've ever seen. His sack has room for all other burdens, all burdens through time. I had hoped to lay my burdens at the manger, perhaps even to exchange my sack for one filled with gifts. But as I look, I wonder—if the Child carries such burdens, is there any hope for us? Are we not condemned to bear our burdens alone? Then I realize what's wrong. The Child has just picked up His burden. His sack will only fall at the foot of the cross, where He will invite us to lay ours as well. It's not relief from burdens that we celebrate at Christmas. We celebrate instead the realization that others also bear burdens, that burdens can be—and indeed, are—shared, and that shared burdens are lightened. Most of all, we celebrate Paul's understanding that God provides a Way for us to endure all burdens.