Hebrews 10:5-7
New International Version

Therefore, when Christ came into the world, he said:

“Sacrifice and offering you did not desire,
but a body you prepared for me;
with burnt offerings and sin offerings
you were not pleased.
Then I said, ‘Here I am—it is written about me in the scroll—
I have come to do your will, my God.’”

The Word of the Lord:
Thanks be to God!

For most of us, it wouldn’t be Christmas if we didn’t hear once again Clement Moore’s poem “The Night Before Christmas”. In fact, most of our secular traditions about Christmas come from this famous poem. I won’t quote it all, but listen to just these opening lines:

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.

A wonderful poem, isn’t it?

There is another poem, written by the American poet Francis
Thompson, not known nearly as well as Clement Moore’s poem, entitled
“Little Jesus”⁴. Listen to these opening lines:
   Little Jesus, wast Thou shy
   Once, and just so small as I?
   And what did it feel like to be
   Out of Heaven, and just like me?

   So let’s think about this for a few minutes. We know the Christmas
story, of course, how Jesus was born in Bethlehem, in a stable, to Mary and
Joseph. We know about the announcement of his birth to the shepherds and
of their visit to the manger. All these facts are well-told in Luke’s and
Matthew’s gospels.

   But Francis Thompson’s poem takes us into territory we don’t often
visit and leads us to wonder what was on Christ’s mind just before he was
born into human flesh?

   It is the writer⁵ of the book of Hebrews who takes on this question,
quoting from Psalm 40:6-8:
   Sacrifice and offering you did not desire—
      but my ears you have opened—
      burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not require.
   Then I said, “Here I am, I have come—
      it is written about me in the scroll.
   I desire to do your will, my God;
      your law is within my heart.”

   And here we have at least a glimpse into the mind of Christ as he
submitted himself to be born into human flesh.

From our own human point of view, it seems that Jesus began in Bethlehem. But the opening words of John’s gospel say otherwise:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

This is a great mystery, but even before the human baby named Jesus was born, the Son of God existed for all eternity.

So why did he come to us? As suggested in this passage from Hebrews, he came to atone for the sins of all of us, because the animal sacrifices were not sufficient. Now, I am sure that came as a great shock to all the Jewish priests of that day who were continuing the centuries-old tradition of offering bulls and goats as sacrifices for the people.

They continued this sacrificial system because they sincerely believed that is what God wanted from them. They were not wrong in doing what they did, they simply did not understand the truth we learn here in Hebrews 10:4, “For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.” In verse 11 of that same chapter, the writer tells us just how inadequate was the sacrificial system:

Every priest stands day after day ministering and offering the same sacrifices time after time, which can never take away sins.

“Never take away sins”, he writes. Yet, during the 1,500 years or so from the time of Moses to the time of Christ, it was the best they could do. They knew that sins had to be accounted for and this was how they did it.

But the blood of the sacrificed animals could not and did not properly atone for their sins. Way back in 1709, the hymnwriter Isaac Watts wrote about this in a hymn he called “Not All the Blood of Beasts”6. Listen to the first two stanzas:

Not all the blood of beasts
On Jewish altars slain
Could give the guilty conscience peace
Or wash away the stain.

But Christ, the heav’nly Lamb,
Takes all our sins away;
A sacrifice of nobler name
And richer blood than they.

It was the Lamb of God who came to take away the sins of the world.

So, if we can put it in human terms, we can imagine a conversation between God the Father and God the Son:
Now, I want you to go down there [to earth], 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.¹

And, knowing all of this ahead of time, he came just the same. He came to do the will of the Father, knowing exactly what that would mean. What a great Christmas present!

I ran across a beautiful song entitled “Welcome to Our World”². A number of Christian singing artists have recorded it, and the last two stanzas help make the connection between the manger in which Jesus was born and the cross on which he gave his life for us.

Fragile finger sent to heal us
Tender brow prepared for them
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, Perfect Son of God
Welcome to our world.

A story is told of Czar Nicholas of Russia, and maybe you have heard it before. As the story goes, the czar would often wander around his military camps and barracks clothed as an ordinary officer, just to see for himself what was going on.

Late one night when all lights were supposed to be out, the czar noticed a light shining under the paymaster's door. He quietly opened it and stepped inside. A young officer, the son of an old friend of the czar, was seated at a table, his head resting on his arms, and he was sound asleep. The czar stepped over to awaken him, but noticed a loaded revolver, a small pile of money, and a sheet of paper with a pen that had fallen from the hand of the sleeping man.

The light of the candle on the table allowed the czar to read what had been written, and in a moment he understood the situation.

On the sheet of paper was a long list of debts, from gambling and other evil habits. The total ran into many thousands of rubles. The officer had used army funds to pay these reckless debts, and had discovered that the pitifully small balance on hand could not cover what he owed. Below the total of the debt, the young officer had written, “A great debt. Who can pay?”

As the czar realized what had happened, his first thought was to have the man immediately arrested. Justice must be done in the army, and such a crime could not be passed by, the czar reasoned.

But as he remembered the long friendship with the young officer’s father, love and loyalty overcame judgment, and in a moment he devised a plan whereby he could be just toward the army and yet justify the young
The czar took up the pen that had dropped from the hand of the young officer, and with his own hand answered the question “Who can pay?” with one word -- “Nicholas”.

The debt was paid and the debtor was justified. Only the czar could pay and the czar did pay.

This is a story, not about the young Russian officer, but about you and me. We, too, owe a debt, to God, and only Christ Jesus can pay our debt. As John wrote in his gospel, chapter 1, verse 14, “the Word became flesh and lived among us”.

Jesus “pitched his tent” with us for thirty-three years that he might pay with his own blood the debt we owe because of our sin. The story of the young officer is our story. Our debt is enormous and we ask, “Who can pay?” And it is written across our debt, “the blood of the Lamb”.

Christmas is a time of gifts, and we have received the greatest gift of all, eternal life offered by the Lamb of God, who takes away our sins.

Let us pray:

I hear the Savior say,
“Thy strength indeed is small,
Child of weakness, watch and pray,
Find in Me thine all in all.”
Jesus paid it all,
All to Him I owe;
Sin had left a crimson stain,
He washed it white as snow.

And when, before the throne,
I stand in Him complete,
“Jesus died my soul to save”,

My lips shall still repeat.
Jesus paid it all,
All to Him I owe;
Sin had left a crimson stain,
He washed it white as snow.

Amen

1. I first encountered this catchy title in a helpful article by the Rev. Dr. Ray Pritchard of Keep Believing Ministries. When I did a “Dr. Google” search, I discovered it has been used a number of times by various ministers. I could not find the original creative mind behind this catchy phrase.

2. The word “Advent” means “coming” or “arrival”. The focus of the entire season is the celebration of the birth of Jesus the Christ in his First Advent, and the anticipation of the return of Christ the King in his Second Advent. Advent is the beginning of the Church Year for most churches in the Western tradition. It begins on the fourth Sunday before Christmas Day, which is the Sunday nearest November 30, and ends on Christmas Eve (Dec 24). (If Christmas Eve is a Sunday, it is counted as the fourth Sunday of Advent, with Christmas Eve proper beginning at sundown.) See “The Season of Advent: Anticipation and Hope”, by Dennis Bratcher, published in The Voice: Biblical and Theological Resources for Growing Christians, www.cresourcei.org/cyadvent.html.
3. Clement Clarke Moore (1779 – 1863) was Professor of Oriental and Greek Literature, and Professor of Divinity and Biblical Learning at the General Theological Seminary of the Protestant Episcopal Church, in New York City. His most popular poem is “A Visit from St. Nicholas”, which later became famous as “‘Twas the Night Before Christmas”, first published, anonymously, on December 23, 1823. (From www.wikipedia.org)

4. “Little Jesus”, by Francis Thompson (1859 - 1907). Here is the complete poem:

Little Jesus, wast Thou shy
Once, and just so small as I?
And what did it feel like to be
Out of Heaven, and just like me?
Didst Thou sometimes think of there,
And ask where all the angels were?
I should think that I would cry
For my house all made of sky;
I would look about the air,
And wonder where my angels were;
And at waking 'twould distress me–
Not an angel there to dress me!
Hadst thou ever any toys,
Like us little girls and boys?
And dist Thou play in Heaven with all
The angels that were not too tall,
With stars for marbles? Did the things
Play Can you see me? through their wings?
And did Thy Mother let Thee spoil
Thy robes, with playing on our soil?
How nice to have them always new
In Heaven, because ‘twas quite clean blue!
Thou canst not have forgotten all
That it feels like to be small:
And Thou know’st I cannot pray
To Thee in my father’s way–
When Thou was so little, say,
Couldst Thou talk Thy Father’s way?–
So, as a little child, come down
And hear a child's tongue like Thy own;
Take me by the hand and walk,
And listen to my baby-talk.
To Thy Father show my prayer
(He will look, Thou art so fair),
And say: “O Father, I Thy Son,
Bring the prayer of a little one.”
And He will smile, that children’s tongue
Hast not changed since Thou was young!

5. The writer of Hebrews is not identified. Various authors have been proposed: Paul, Barnabas, Apollos, etc. See the brief essay on authorship at www.biblica.com/en-us/bible/online-bible/scholar-notes/niv-study-bible/intro-to-hebrews/.

6. First published in “Hymns and Spiritual Songs”, 1709. The hymn tune is “Southwell (Daman)”, composed by William Daman and published in “Psalms of David in English Meter”, 1579. The other three verses are:

My faith would lay her hand
On that dear head of Thine,
While, like a penitent, I stand,
And there confess my sin.

My soul looks back to see
The burdens Thou didst bear
When hanging on the cursed tree,
And hopes her guilt was there.

Believing, we rejoice
To see the curse remove;
We bless the Lamb with cheerful voice,
And sing His bleeding love.
(www.hymntime.com/tch/htm/n/a/l/nalblood.htm)

7. Quoted from the Rev. Dr. Ray Pritchard, at www.keepbelieving.com/sermon/2013-12-25-Twas-the-Night-Before-Christmas/.


9. “Jesus Paid It All”, words written by Elvina M. Hall in 1865; sung to the tune “All to Christ”, composed by John T. Grape.