

## The Contrasts of Christmas

### *Bring The Silent Song of Peace*

Luke 2:7, 2 Corinthians 8:9

by  
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On Christmas Eve in 1914 World War I was at its peak. Millions of allied troops huddled together in foul and muddy trenches across France. They were only a hundred yards or so from the German trenches and both sides were like animals, burrowing into the ground for protection from the incessant machine gun fire, the snipers and the winter cold. On both sides the war weary troops longed to be at home celebrating the holiday with their families. It was, one of the most miserable ways to spend Christmas man has ever devised, but, on this night, one of the most unusual events ever recorded in Military History took place.

The British troops had just received cards from King George and Queen Mary that read, “May God protect you and bring you home safe.” Princess Mary had sent gifts of tobacco and cigarettes. The Germans had received spiced cake, apples and nuts from Berlin and messages that said, “Continue in cold blood,” and “No words and wishes, but will and work”—sour notes for Christmas. Then, on Christmas Eve, British sentries, listening through the dark, began to hear unusual sounds from the German trenches. Hymns and carols drifted through the cold night air. They began to see small lights being raised on poles or bayonets above the enemy trenches, clearly illuminating the German troops. Startled, the British held their fire. Soon they saw Christmas trees being held aloft with candles burning brightly. It soon became clear that the Germans were following their custom of celebrating the birth of Christ on the afternoon before Christmas and they were extending holiday greetings to the British.

After a truly *silent night*, for a front line used to constant gun fire, the light of dawn began to reveal a heavy mist shrouding both sides from view. Cries of “Merry Christmas” in German and English came from the German trenches. Men on both sides began to walk about in the open, covered by fog. By 8:30 a.m. the British began to see the dim figures of the Germans moving about freely. Then as the mist dissipated spontaneous signs reading, “Merry Christmas” were seen on both sides.

At about 10:00 a.m. small groups of soldiers could be seen sitting in the middle of no man's Land, without their weapons, as the two enemy forces began to mingle together. All along the line troops from the two opposing armies began to walk toward each others' lines in a spontaneous and unofficial truce. They cheered and sang together, exchanged gifts of tobacco, plum pudding, cakes and fruit. In one location a rather rough game of soccer was played, British against German with the Germans winning 3-2. They even exchanged materials to help each other reinforce their wire entanglements. They visited each other's trenches, exchanging hats and helmets. By mutual consent no one fired throughout Christmas day. Sniping and patrols began again around midnight with normal military activity the day after Christmas.

This day, when common folk erupted from their trenches, laying their weapons aside, to play together for a few hours songs like this one were written to tell about their escapade. I don't know the tune so, for me, it is simply a soldier's poem, one I can identify with because I have been in no man's land—on Christmas:

Living it up, living it up  
The best way that we can,  
On bully beef and biscuits  
and pots of Tickler's jam,  
Machonochie's and Bovril - - -  
It really will be grand.  
Doing the two-step  
With the Boche in No Man's Land. [www.ralphmag.org/CB/briefs.html Dec. 22, 2004]

*Boche*, of course, was the derogatory British nickname for their German enemies. It meant "a thick headed person." [Webster's Dictionary] So, in the midst of a horrible war the Christmas Truce became a blink in time when men were united, not as bitter enemies, but as human beings under the common banner of Christ, as they danced together in the land of death between their miserable trenches.

The effect of this brief, spontaneous truce was so immense that some military authorities denied that it ever took place, apparently afraid the troops would conspire to refuse to fight. Orders went out on both sides forbidding *informal understandings* of this nature on the field of battle, but the contrast of that vicious war with that spontaneous truce on Christmas Day would forever remain in the hearts and minds of those soldiers. [Shepherd]

Over the years, as I have thought about this mysterious truce, I have delved more deeply into the contrasts of Christmas. There are four that I find particularly meaningful.

**The first contrast:** Jesus endured a *human birth to give you and me a spiritual birth.* First the human birth of Jesus. Luke 2:11 tells us "...for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." Jesus, in effect, stepped out of the fog to do the two-step with the Boche—God's thick headed children — in no-man's land, in a place where the Prince of the Earth, Satan, kept the battle raging. Jesus came and gave his life for you and me, to pay the penalty for our sin and as a result He made possible our spiritual birth if we put our faith in what He has done. He came into no-man's land to save us! John 1:12, "*But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name.*" Jesus came through the *physical* birth to introduce us to the concept of a *spiritual* birth. The contrast of that vicious war with Satan and that two-step with the Boche, God's thick headed children, on Christmas Day will forever remain in the hearts and minds of the faithful.

**The second contrast:** Jesus took an earthly mother to give you and me a heavenly Father. Again, we look at the *physical* before considering the *spiritual*.

Matthew 2:11 says “*And they came into the house and saw the Child with Mary His mother: and they fell down and worshiped Him:...*”

Now consider the *spiritual* in Galatians 3:28. “*For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus.*” How could we have ever known God as a Father if Jesus had not been born to a virgin. He had to show us that while Mary was His mother, God was His true Father and that if we believed in Him we too would be born again of the Spirit, having God as our heavenly Father. That was the reason for the virgin birth. This was His two-step with the Boche in no-man’s land and we will never forget that moment in time.

**The third contrast:** Jesus was born in a stable to give you and me a heavenly mansion. Again the physical is contrasted against the spiritual. Luke 2:7, “*...she gave birth to her first born son; and she wrapped Him in cloths. and laid Him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn.*” Contrast this with John 14:2 where Jesus said, “*In my Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so. I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you.*” If Jesus had come as an earthly king, born in a palace, how could we have identified with Him? He came for those who needed Him the most: the poor, the disabled, the sick, the prisoner and the down trodden—the ones lost in sin. The Holy Spirit made sure that there was no room for Him in the inn so that we could see the contrast between the world and heaven where a mansion awaits. Once more, He came into no-man’s land to do the two-step with the Boche so that we could understand a reality we could not see. We will never forget that blink in time.

**The fourth contrast:** Jesus was born physically poor so that you and I might become spiritually rich. Joseph was a carpenter living in a poor district of Galilee. Their mode of travel and the fact that they had to purchase two turtle doves, a poor man's sacrifice, on the day of the Christ child's circumcision, all point to their poverty. Later in his life, Jesus, Himself, told us that He was homeless. In Matthew 8:20 He said that, “*the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.*” Then in 2 Corinthians 8:9 we are taught, “*...He became poor that you, through His poverty might become rich.*” He was born into physical poverty and He lived in poverty all His life to show us where our priorities should lie. He taught that real wealth is not to be found in material accumulations. It can only be found in His service. When we feed the hungry, give the thirsty a drink, invite the stranger in, clothe the naked, and visit the sick or imprisoned in His name we store up treasures in heaven worth far more than any of this world's fleeting wealth. Again, we note that He came to do the two-step with the Boche in no-man’s land and His soldiers will never forget His hour of Grace..

### **The Hour of Grace**

(Christmas 1914)

A tree stuck out in Flanders  
Adorned with candles, bows  
A voice starts off the carols  
A song that both sides know

And then, a gestured kindness;  
A man treads o'er the ground  
To offer Christmas greetings  
To 'enemies' counting rounds

One Tommy, then another  
Responds to Fritz's gift  
Rose, went out in snowbound mud  
The gloom of war to lift

A song rang out in No-man's -land  
Through Flanders, France and Ypres;  
Above the soldiers' laughter -  
The silent song of Peace. (author unknown)

This, I believe, captures the final affect of Christ's two-step with the Boche in no-man's land. It is a contrast between Christ's way and the way we were. Christ came into our no-man's land where we live in an unnatural state of war, always under fire. But the moment we ask Him into our heart everything that has gone before stands in sharp contrast to what He gives, for in that moment we inherit the spiritual riches of heaven. And we sing the silent song of Peace.

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