

# The Substance of Christmas

*Hebrews 8:5; Colossians 1:15; 2:17; John 1:1–18*

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Pastor Trent Eastman — New Baptist Church, Huntington, West Virginia

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## The Shadow Box

On this Sunday before Christmas, I want to begin with a simple object lesson — though I hope you'll see, before we're done, that the lesson is anything but simple.

I have here a box I've built, which I'm calling a shadow box. When you place an object inside and turn on a light, its shadow appears on the front of the panel — the outline, the shape, the silhouette of the thing. Take a small figure of a lion, for example. There is the shadow: you can see the mane, the tail, the four legs, the great head. A shadow, in other words, is the shape or outline of something real. It has the appearance of the object, but it lacks the object's substance. If you remove the lion, the shadow disappears with it.

Now, can we learn things from a shadow? Of course we can. From the shadow of the lion, you can tell a great deal — that it has a mane, that it is a large and powerful animal, that it moves on four legs. But that learning is genuinely limited. If you really want to know what a lion is like, you would have to meet one.

With that in mind, I want to show you four more shadows.

The first is a small loaf of bread. The second is a miniature Ark of the Covenant — that chest of acacia wood overlaid with gold that stood at the center of Israel's worship. In the Old Testament, God instructed His people to build a tabernacle, and in the innermost chamber — the Holy of Holies — this ark was placed. Inside it was the law of God; on top of it was a lid called the mercy seat, a kind of throne where the glory of God dwelt. Once a year, on the Day of Atonement, the High Priest would enter that holy chamber and make atonement for sin. The mercy seat became the place where man — represented by the priest — approached God, and where God approached man, through an atoning sacrifice.

The third shadow is a cross with a bronze serpent coiled around it. You may remember the story from Numbers 21. The children of Israel were in the wilderness, and fiery serpents came among them, biting the people so that many died. The people cried out to Moses, "*Pray to the LORD, that he take away the serpents from us.*" But God did not take the serpents away. Instead, He provided a means by which those who had been bitten could live. He told Moses to make a bronze serpent and set it on a pole, and anyone who looked at it would be healed.

The fourth shadow is a Torah scroll. Before there were books, this is how the Scriptures were kept — rolled on two wooden handles, unrolled by hand. This particular scroll contains what we call the Law, the first five books of the Bible.

So I have shown you five things: a lion, a loaf of bread, the Ark of the Covenant, a bronze serpent on a pole, and a Torah scroll. What do they have in common?

Here is the answer: all five are shadows of Jesus. This is one of the central arguments of the book of Hebrews, which tells us in chapter eight that these things “*serve as a copy and shadow of the heavenly things*” (Hebrews 8:5). Throughout history, as recorded in the Old Testament, God gave His people a shadow of Himself.

And remember what a shadow is — a shape or outline of something real, with no substance of its own. What, then, can we learn about God from these shadows? Quite a bit, actually.

The shadow of the lion tells us that our Lord reigns over all of creation. He is the great King.

The shadow of bread tells us that He is a God who provides for our daily needs — that He gives us what we need for life.

The shadow of the Ark of the Covenant tells us that God provides a way of forgiveness and reconciliation through atonement.

The shadow of the bronze serpent tells us that God provides a means of salvation to people who are perishing and in desperate need.

The shadow of the Torah tells us that God is good, holy, just, and righteous — full of loving-kindness and mercy. It is a big shadow. But it is still just a shadow.

These are some of what we can learn about God by looking at the shadows He has given us. And yet — remember the lion. Because a shadow is only the outline or shape of something real, having no substance of its own, what we can know through it is limited. To really know what a lion is like, you would have to meet one. In the same way, to really know what God is like — to truly *know* Him — you would have to meet Him. But because He is God, incomparable and beyond our reach, we cannot go to meet Him. He must come to meet us.

**And He did.**

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## **The Veil Torn**

This is why we celebrate Christmas.

There came a moment in history when the veil that cast these shadows was torn, and the real substance of God was born to us — a child in a manger. Colossians 2:17 says plainly: “*These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.*”

When Jesus died upon the cross, the physical veil of the temple was torn from top to bottom, signifying that you and I, through Christ, can enjoy the very presence of God. But when Jesus was born in Bethlehem, a different kind of veil was torn — a spiritual veil, a mystery that had kept all of creation in the shadows. And this tearing of the spiritual veil is precisely what John is describing in the opening chapter of his Gospel:

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.*

John is telling us that the substance belongs to Christ — that everything which exists was made through and for Him. And then, in verse fourteen, he speaks of the moment the veil was torn:

*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.*

Notice what John says. Not “*we have seen his shadow,*” but “*we have seen his glory.*” And that word *full* — it means complete, entire, lacking nothing. Jesus is not a shadow of God’s grace and truth. He is the substance of them. This is why He is Immanuel — God with us.

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## **Getting Out of the Shadows**

Are there still shadows of God around us today? Absolutely. We are surrounded by them, and Christmas is full of them. The Christmas tree, the lights twinkling on its branches, the gifts wrapped beneath it, the special meals, the carols we sing, even the manger scenes we set out in our homes — all of these are beautiful shadows that point to something, or better said, to *someone*, far greater and more real.

But many people love the shadows and miss the real. Many people love the Christmas season — the gifts, the decorations, the music — and yet miss the very one that all of these things are shadows of: Immanuel, Jesus the Christ.

So here is my challenge, not only to you but to everyone here: get out of the shadows and meet Jesus. How does that happen?

It begins by knowing and accepting that this child in the manger is, as Colossians 1:15 declares, “*the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation*” — which means that

everything Jesus said about Himself is true. That He is the Son of God who came to do what only He could do.

He is the Lion of Judah who conquers sin and death. He is the Bread of Life who satisfies the deepest hunger of the soul. He is the mercy seat, where God's justice and mercy meet in His atoning sacrifice. He is the bronze serpent lifted up to save all who look to Him by faith. He is the living Word — the fulfillment of everything the Law and the Prophets had been pointing toward all along.

And then, having come to know and accept who this child is, you must trust Him. Trusting Him means turning from your own sin — that is repentance — and receiving what He has done for you — that is forgiveness — and abiding in what He has promised — that is eternal life. It is in that faith, in knowing who He is and trusting Him, that you step out of the shadows, through the presence of His Spirit, and meet the one who is real.

The joy of Christmas is not only that He came two thousand years ago in Bethlehem, but that through faith, you and I can meet Him today — right now, right here. The veil has been torn. The shadows have given way to substance.

Immanuel. God with us.