

“THE MEANING OF CHRISTMAS” Part 1

HOLINESS

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Isaiah 40:1-5

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Let's open your Bibles, please. I invite you to turn to Luke chapter 2, the passage for our examination today as we look at the meaning of Christmas.

Before I get into that, Dan asked us a very good question last week about why is it that the blood is so important, and why did God use blood when blood might be something that people might think might be irritating, or something that would be ugly? And I answered the question by saying that without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sins. That's absolutely true. But Jay Batch sent me a verse that helps me to understand a little bit more of that. Let's go to Leviticus chapter 17, verse 11, and Dan, this may be a little more helpful for you.

Leviticus 17, verse 11. "For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls. For it is the blood that makes atonement by the life." Now, if you take that verse, Leviticus 17:11, that might give you a better understanding of why we went through Leviticus 8, and the blood was on your toe, your ear, and your thumb. It might help us to understand that. Leviticus 17, verse 11, might be a good answer for you, Dan.

Let's go to Luke chapter 2, please. For the next couple of weeks, I want to teach us a little bit about the true meaning of Christmas. What is Christmas really all about? And I want to read this passage, one we're very familiar with, and I'm going to ask that you might stand, that we might just do honor to the fact that we're going to discuss the Lord's birth. Would you stand with me, if you're able?

Let us hear the reading of God's word. "In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, to the town of Nazareth in Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. She gave birth to her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling clothes, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

"In the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone all around them, and they were filled with fear. And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy, that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign for you. You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, and lying in a manger.","

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“And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom He is pleased.”,”

“When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.”,”

“And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had seen and heard, as it had been told them.” May God be pleased to open our eyes at the hearing of His word. This is the word of the Lord.

Men: Thanks be to God!

Bruce: Please be seated.

For the next two weeks, I’d like to just bring us two quick messages on the true meaning of Christmas. But first of all, I want us to understand what Christmas is not. If we’re going to understand what Christmas is, we need to understand what Christmas is not.

Christmas itself, by itself, is nothing special. The date came from a pagan observance of the birthday of the unconquered sun. They held two weeks of feasts, parades, special music, gift giving, lighted candles, and green trees. In 336 A.D., emperor Constantine declared Christ’s birthday an official Roman holiday. Some believers protested, but the declaration of that holiday stuck.

We don’t know what day Jesus was born. The name Christmas is the short form of a word, “Christ’s mass,” a Catholic mass which grew out of a special feast day in 1038 A.D., which has nothing to do with the Scripture.

Santa Claus is the result of a fourth century bishop, St. Nicholas, who gave his possessions to the poor, and supposedly resurrected two dead children from the grave. This tradition was imported to America by way of Holland, where people placed wooden shoes by the fireplace on December the fifth, for the visit of friendly saints. In the U.S., kids use socks because they’re bigger, and you can stuff more things into them. (*Laughter.*) This tradition was perpetuated by the poem “The Night Before Christmas” by Clement Moore.

Now here are some facts. I prepared this message several years ago, so the numerical data is somewhat changed. It’s probably less when I gave you this, and it’s probably more now. But you’ll understand the significance of what I’m saying. But listen to these facts that impact what we do around Christmas, to show you what Christmas is not.

The sending of Christmas cards is less than 125 years old. In the year 2005, 70 million families spent over 900 million dollars on Christmas cards, and \$380 million on postage. The spirit of giving has become the spirit of indulgence. In the same year, 2005, \$15 billion was spent on 1-1/2 billion gifts, wrapped in over \$150 billion worth of paper.

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The tree is another feature of the pagan festival that didn't arrive until the sixteenth century. The Puritans in early America called this day, Christmas, “Romish rags,” and deliberately worked on December 25th in Massachusetts to show their disdain for this pagan holiday tradition.

When we strip away the date, the name, Santa Claus, cards, presents, gift giving and the tree, what's left? Nothing. Nothing is left in what we call Christmas.

Now how much of that is Christian? Nothing. None of it is commanded by the Lord. None of it is taught by the disciples, and none of it was observed by the early church.

So is Christmas wrong? Well, not as long as we recognize that there is nothing sacred or spiritual about the day itself. We can enjoy time with our families and friends, enjoy giving gifts and loving one another, and being together as families. And I think that there is another advantage we can use at this season of life, because at least people are somewhat aware of the name Christ. That may be a good opportunity for us to proclaim the Person and work of Christ.

So,. Is there anything wrong with Christmas? As long as you realize that there is nothing spiritual about the whole history of it, and the day itself.

So what is the meaning of Christmas? If that's what Christmas is not, what do we, as followers of Christ, of the Lord Jesus, what do we say that Christmas really is? Well, let me take you to Isaiah chapter 40, and verse 5. Now here is a verse that I think is the best description of what Christmas really is. I've tried to show you what Christmas is really not. Now let me show you, in my judgment, what Christmas really is.

Isaiah chapter 40, verse 5. The prophet says this. “And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

Do you know what Christmas is really about? It's about the glory of the LORD revealed. That's what Christmas is about. Notice the number of times in the verses that I read in Luke chapter 2, verses 1-20, the number of times the glory of the LORD was mentioned.

Notice the other renditions of the birth of Christ. You'll always notice that the glory of the Lord is somewhere intertwined in the historical events in the recording of that activity. In my definition, the best description of Christmas is the glory of the Lord revealed. Now, if that's true, and the Scripture says it is, let me take you to what then is the gospel.

If the Lord Jesus Christ is the means by which the gospel is communicated, what is the gospel going to be about? If the meaning of Christmas is the glory of the Lord revealed, let's go to 2 Corinthians chapter 4, verse 6.

Now my point is this. The meaning of Christmas is the glory of the Lord revealed. If that is when Christ was introduced to the world, what do you think the gospel is going to be about?

Participant: Christ.

Bruce: It's going to be about the glory of the Lord. Notice, in 2 Corinthians chapter 4, verse 6. “For God said, “Let light shine out of darkness.” It has shone in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.”,”

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That’s the gospel. It is the glory of God in the face of Christ. The meaning of Christmas is the glory of the Lord revealed. That was the beginning of the presentation of the gospel. The gospel contains this message. It is the glory of God in the face of Christ. When you look into the face of Christ, you see the glory of God. What is the meaning of Christmas? It is the glory of God revealed.

Now go to chapter 3 of 1 Corinthians, and look down at verse 18. Now here is what the gospel does, the purpose of the gospel. If we’ve seen that the meaning of Christmas is the glory of the Lord revealed, the gospel is about the glory of God in the face of Christ, then what is the purpose of the gospel? I’m trying to follow a significant biblical transition here. 3:18. “And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image, from one degree of glory to another, for this comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.”

You see, the content of the gospel is the glory of the Lord in the face of Christ, and the purpose of the gospel is to change and transform us from one stage of glory to the next, to show the glory of the Lord revealed. That’s the meaning of Christmas—Isaiah chapter 40, verse 5, the glory of the LORD revealed.

Now let’s go back to our passage. What do I mean when I say “the glory of the LORD revealed?” The glory of the Lord is the manifestation of His own character. It is the revelation of Himself. It is a disclosure of Himself in all of His character.

For those of us who know and love Christ, Christmas is no different than any other day. It’s a celebration of God’s mercy, in revealing Himself to us, a chance for us to experience His glory revealed. Every day is a day of Christmas for us theologically, because it’s a day for us to experience the glory of the Lord revealed in the face of Christ, through the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now I want us to see this and to examine this passage in Luke chapter 2 because I’m coming off the premise that the glory of the Lord revealed is the meaning of Christmas. Now, that being true, then we need to see some historical background as to what was going on for the glory of the Lord to be revealed, as recorded in Luke chapter two.

So look at verses 1-9. I want you to see how God prepared His glory to be revealed. How did God prepare His glory to be revealed? Luke chapter 2, verses 1-9.

Now, in preparing for His glory to be revealed, we discover that God is the sovereign Lord of history. Let me give you some historical background as to why I make that statement. God is the sovereign Lord of history.

Caesar Augustus was an honorary title, conferred in 27 B.C. on Octavian, who was the adopted heir of Julius Caesar, and was known as the first Roman emperor. He was a better administrator than Julius Caesar, and established the republic form of government, which had been lost, as Rome the city became Rome the empire.

As a general, Octavian brought peace to the entire Roman world, and he gained the mastery of the world. Augustus, a diligent organizer and administrator, organized this provincial registration to see who was eligible for military service, and to increase his taxation capabilities.

Now notice that, in obedience to a decree by this man, we see two people traveling along the road, led from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Now this census was taken every

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fourteen years. Each person was required to be enrolled or registered where their family registry was kept. You see that in verses 3-4.

Now Mary and Joseph were strangers to this town of Bethlehem, which was six miles southwest of Jerusalem. Now we have no record of Mary and Joseph ever having visited there, and Jesus never visited there after He was born. King David is never recorded having contact with the city, and he never went back, and is never mentioned afterward as being in Bethlehem. Mary’s attendance in Bethlehem is probably not necessary, as the male could do all the registering for the family.

So what we have here, guys, is this. We have a combination of a decree by a Roman emperor in distant Rome, and the gossiping tongues of Nazareth that brought Mary to Bethlehem. For Joseph to have left Mary in Nazareth would have been gossip, because she was pregnant and had not been married yet in their eyes. So there is a great possibility that one of the reasons that he took her was to protect her from the gossiping tongues of the city of Nazareth.

So we have this decree from an emperor in Rome, and the gossiping tongues of Nazareth that brought Mary to Bethlehem. Now is that just a mere coincidence? Is that just mere luck? Absolutely not. Not at all. God’s sovereignty uses all kinds of people to affect His purpose. Now the only reason that Mary came to Bethlehem was that God said that is where the Son would be born. That’s the only reason she was there. And God is the sovereign Ruler of history, orchestrating even nonbelievers for His glory, in preparation for the glory of the Lord to be revealed. He’s controlling history, because He’s setting up this magnificent movement called the glory of the LORD revealed.

You see, the people helping God to do what He did just helped to prepare to have the glory of the Lord revealed.

Look at Micah chapter 5, verse 2. “But you, Bethlehem Ephratha, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come from Me One who will rule over Israel, whose origins are from old, from ancient times.” The only reason that Mary was in Bethlehem is because that is where God said that Jesus would be born. He just used historical events going on at the time because of His sovereign Lordship with the rulers of the world to make those events occur, because He is preparing Himself for the glory of the Lord to be revealed.

It is rather fitting that the town known as “the house of bread,” Bethlehem, should be the birthplace of One who is called “the bread of life.” Coincidence? Absolutely not. It’s the sovereign rulership of a holy God, orchestrating world events in order to prepare the world to have the glory of the Lord revealed in the Person and work of Christ.

Now what does all of this historical background tell us? It tells us that the Lord of history used the actions of a far away emperor in Rome to set in motion His divine plan to show the world the glory of the Lord revealed. In history preceding the birth of Christ, we see the glory of the Lord prepared. Then, at His birth, we see the glory of the Lord revealed.

Now from the standpoint of Rome’s authority, it was strictly an administrative technique to ensure governmental control of the provinces. Rome wasn’t even conscious of these two travelers. It cared nothing about them, except that they were in bondage to

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some Roman decree. But from the standpoint of God we see the woman, walking on this road was the temple of the Son of God, as she bore His body, necessary for the carrying out of the glory of the Lord to be revealed. The Judean hills were unconscious of it, and Rome had no suspicion of it. But to God, the ultimate expression of His glory revealed was being born along the Judean road. God is preparing for the glory of the Lord to be revealed.

Now let me make a couple of applications. One of the things we always need to do. Learning does not stop at knowledge. Learning needs to be living.

Let's make some applications of the fact that the glory of the Lord is being prepared to be revealed, because God is the sovereign Ruler of history.

First of all, I would offer for your consideration that God is in control, and can be trusted. God is in control of world events, and can be trusted. When the emperor set out his decree, little did he know that God was going to use his decree for the fulfillment of God's purpose in preparing the glory of the Lord to be revealed. God is in control, and can be trusted.

The second thing for your consideration is that we can rest in God's timing. We can rest in God's sovereign timing. God knows the best season to send help. Therefore, don't give yourself into anxiety, because God is the Master of timing. We can trust and rest in God's timing.

Notice Psalm 31, verses 14 and 15. “But I trust in You, O LORD. I say, “You are my God. My times are in Your hands. Deliver me from my enemies.”,”

“My times are in Your hands.” Not only is God in control, and He can be trusted, but we can rest in God's ultimate sovereign timing.

Thirdly, I want to offer this for your consideration, as an application of the glory of God to be revealed. We can trust in God's providential government of the world. Don't be overly disturbed by the tumult and rulers of this world. They can do nothing except what God allows, and nothing which is not used by God. Now we may not understand it. We may not even like it. We might not even think that He is operating. But we can trust Him through it all. Romans 13:1. “Everyone must submit to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.”

Now do I understand all that? No, but I do know this. God is in control, and can be trusted. I do know this. We can rest in God's timing. And I also know this. We can trust in God's providential government of the world.

And one more consideration for your thinking today. Obedience is evidence of trust in the sovereignty of God. The One who would later say, “What is due Caesar render to Caesar, and what is due God render to God” had not yet been born. Yet that statement was already being obeyed by His earthly parents. Obedience is evidence of trust in the sovereignty of God.

The sovereignty of god means this, that God has the right to rule. The sovereignty of God means that whatever God does is for His glory and your benefit. We can trust God. Trust Him in His timing. Trust Him in His providential care, and realize that our obedience is evidence of our trust in the sovereignty of God. Joseph and Mary never

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thought of refusing to obey the Scripture. This is evidence of our trust in the sovereignty of God.

So I’ve walked you through something about His glory prepared. Now let’s talk a little about His glory revealed. If the meaning of Christmas is the glory of the Lord revealed, we’ve seen the preparation—how God sovereignly used history to prepare His entrance into humanity, as the means of demonstrating His glory revealed. Let’s talk about how it is revealed.

Now what concerns me about this rendering of the story of Jesus, and His birth in Luke chapter two, is that there were some people who missed it. They missed the glory of the Lord revealed.

There are always two results of Christ’s coming, and there always will be. Not only is He a Savior to some, but He is also a stumbling block to others. That’s the response that Christ has had in this day, in this time in history, and in our current time in history. To some people He is Christ the Lord, and He is the Savior. To other people, He is a stumbling block. His presence is either, as Paul writes, a sweet aroma of life unto life, or an aroma of death unto death. It’s one or the other, Savior or stumbling block.

Now we see the extraordinary fact of this rendering in Luke chapter 2, verses 1-20, the extraordinary fact that some people who were far away come to Christ, and tragically, there were some people who were so close who missed Him. Those are the people who I have concern for—those people in today’s society who are so close, but they never see the glory of the Lord revealed, because they’re wrapped up in Christmas, and they miss the meaning, which is the glory of the Lord revealed.

Let me show you people who missed it, and make some applications to today’s culture. First of all, in verse 1. Notice the Romans. The Roman soldiers and officials carried out the functions of this census. They were always in the scene throughout the life of Jesus. Christ was tried before the Romans. He was executed by the Romans. His body was guarded by the Romans. And the Romans even lied about His resurrection.

But why is it that they who were always so close to Christ—they were always around Him! They saw the glory of the Lord revealed every day, and they missed it! They were so close, but they didn’t see.

Why is it that they missed the glory of the Lord revealed? It’s because of idolatry. Idolatry is trusting someone or something to give you only what God can give you. They had their own false gods, and Jesus just didn’t fit into their system.

Jerusalem worshiped the right God in the wrong way, and the Romans worshiped the wrong god, because of idolatry.

Now what is the resemblance to today? My great concern about the Christmas season, brothers, is this. There are so many people who get wrapped up in Christmas, and they miss the glory of the Lord revealed, because of their idolatry. Most people miss the glory of the Lord revealed because they have their own idols.

Let me list some. Money, pleasure, sports, materialism, careers, power, prestige, popularity, fame. They miss Him. They miss the glory of the Lord revealed. These are just some of the 20th- and 21st-century idols.

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Beware of your idols, brothers, or you’ll miss Christmas. You’ll miss the glory of the Lord revealed.

Another man who missed Him was the innkeeper in verse 7. He was busy carrying about his gifts, which was his duty. Roman officials had to stay at inns, whereas the Jews had to stay with their relatives, because they wouldn’t be hosts to the Romans, as the Romans had no contact with the Jews socially; no social contact.

Now Middle Eastern people are extremely hospitable. They’re very kind and very caring and very hospitable. They consider guests an honor, even guests sent from God.

So why is it that this Mid-Eastern inn keeper, who had a tradition of hospitality, why did he miss the glory of the Lord revealed? He was so close, but he missed it! Why did he miss it? The Romans missed it because of idolatry. The inn keeper missed it because he was too preoccupied. He was too busy.

The great tragedy in America today is this. He wasn’t really hostile. He wasn’t unloving. He wasn’t unsympathetic, and he wasn’t indifferent. He was just too busy. That’s the resemblance that’s striking today in our culture. The rooms of people’s souls are filled with needless things—human interests, and things that really don’t matter. Our society, tragically, is filled with the unnecessary, the insignificant and the meaningless. And people miss the glory of the Lord revealed, because we’re just too busy.

Many are too busy at figuring out what they want, how to get it at the cheapest price, how to keep it, how to care for it, how to polish it, and how to store it. (*Laughter.*) You see, we’re just too busy. And all the pleasure, and all the passions, and all the parties, and all the presents so preoccupy us that many people today, who are so close, are going to miss the glory of the Lord revealed, because they are just too busy. For the Romans, idolatry. For the innkeeper and America, too preoccupied with our busyness, with the insignificant, and the meaningless.

Participant: Hey, Bruce?

Bruce: Yes, please?

Participant: Also, you mentioned it some before, and we do it here in America as well. We want the government to supply something.

Bruce: Yes, we’ve made the government an idol, haven’t we, because idolatry is trusting someone or something to give us only what God can give us. The government can’t do that for us. Only a sovereign God who is the Ruler of history can do that. Today, people in the city of Pittsburgh will miss the glory of the Lord revealed, because they’re just too busy.

One other group missed it, and that would be the people of Jerusalem. Notice verses 8-38 of Luke chapter 2. The Romans missed Him. The inn keeper missed Him. And the people of Jerusalem missed Him.

Only two people, other than the shepherds, took notice of the Messiah’s birth. That is Simeon in verse 25, who was a righteous and devout man, and Anna in verse 36, a woman who served God in the temple for eighty-four years.

Now why did the people of Jerusalem miss Christ? Why did they miss the glory of the Lord revealed? He was born right in their area, and they missed Him! Why did they miss Him? They missed Him because of religious ritual. They were so busy carrying out

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their rituals that they missed the reality. And so many people today are going to be wrapped up in participating in the rituals of Christmas that they are going to miss the reality of the glory of the Lord revealed. They are just busy worshiping the right God in the wrong way.

What’s the resemblance to today? Well, in my judgment, religion will damn people faster than anything else, if it’s false religion, or if it’s true religion in the wrong way. It gives people a place to hide, and to think that they’re spiritual. They think that they’re safe. They talk about God and the Bible and the Scripture. But in the midst of their own activity, they are lost, because they missed the glory of the Lord revealed.

So there are many reasons why people miss the reality of Christmas. Idolatry, preoccupation, and religious ritual are just a few. But behind all these reasons, there is one basic reason why people miss the glory of the Lord revealed, and that is unbelief.

Idolatry is an outward expression of unbelief. Preoccupation is an outward expression of unbelief. Religious ritual is an outward expression of unbelief. The reason they miss the glory of the Lord revealed is because of unbelief.

John 1:10 says this. “The world was made by Him, but the world did not know Him.”

Well, next week, there are those who did not miss the glory of the Lord revealed. And we’ll pick this up next week, as we see those who did see it. Why did they see it? Why do people miss it today? Because of idolatry, preoccupation—too busy,—and religious ritual. May God be pleased to remove those things from us, so that we will not miss the glory of the Lord revealed, which is the true meaning of Christmas.

Let us pray. Father, we are just overwhelmed that we can trust You, and that we can trust Your timing, and we can trust Your providential government of the world situation. And Father, we can also realize that You are the One who prepared the world for the glory of the Lord revealed. May we never miss Christmas because of our idolatry, our preoccupation, or our ritual. And may it be so, that we will have the opportunity to tell people why we look at Christmas differently than any of the people of the system of this world, because we have been exposed to the glory of the Lord revealed, in the Person and face of the Lord Jesus Christ. And may it be so for His glory. And all of God’s children said, “Amen.”