

The Meaning of Christmas

Every December in New York City, Bombay, Japan and Bangkok too, you're likely to see bright lights and hear happy music. It's Christmas time. People of many ethnic backgrounds and beliefs like to celebrate this holiday. Shiny ornaments on trees and the fun of giving and receiving gifts adds to the festivity.

Where did this celebration come from? What does it mean? As we explore the events behind the fun, we will find a fascinating story about the birth of a very intriguing individual called Jesus.

Stars and Prophecies

Let's begin with the beautiful lights strung all around houses and the star we often see on the top of a Christmas tree. Stars have long been studied both by astronomers and those who try to predict the future. Approximately two thousand years ago, a group of philosophers in Asia, called Wisemen, had been studying the stars and some ancient scriptures. The traditions of their country said that a great Savior would one day be born to help the world turn away from evil and suffering.

They also had studied ancient scriptures from the land of Israel. These predicted the unique birth of a ruler whose compassionate character would shine like a star. As they read they became excited, realizing the dates the prophecies pointed to were the very days in which they were living.

One night they were startled to see a new star in the skies. It was not a planet. It was not stationary like normal stars. It seemed to move from where they were towards Israel. Could this be a sign that the predicted Savior had been born? They could not sit still waiting and wondering. They prepared some costly gifts, mounted camels, and followed the star.

When they arrived in Jerusalem, the Wisemen asked, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him." The people were very startled by this sudden appearance of wealthy philosophers and their unusual question. Nobody seemed to know. In fact the present ruler, King Herod, was really troubled at the thought of a rival to his throne.

The religious leaders should have known that it was time for their own scriptures to be fulfilled. They had become careless. However, they did know where the scriptures predicted that the Savior would be born. They told the Wisemen this special birth would take place in the small village of Bethlehem. King Herod told them, "Go and search carefully for the young Child, and when you have found Him, bring back word to me, that I may come and worship Him also." His words disguised his evil intent to protect his kingdom by murdering the child.

The Wisemen waited until nightfall, when delighted to see the star again, they traveled to Bethlehem and found the new born baby. They presented their special gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Gifts at Christmas

This part of the story helps explain the giving of gifts during Christmas. Perhaps you've wondered why so many people around the world give gifts right before the international New Year. It is connected to the three special gifts that the Wisemen gave Jesus. Giving gifts is a wonderful way to express love and appreciation. Parents feel honored when their children show gratitude with a gift. A wife feels very pleased when her husband takes time to choose something special to

demonstrate his affection. Coworkers and their bosses enjoy the exchange of little gifts at Christmas to breakup the monotony of work.

At the time of Jesus' birth gifts such as gold, frankincense, and myrrh were only given to a king. These Wisemen were truly convinced that this little baby was someone very special. They showed their respect and honor in the best way they could.

In the meantime, King Herod was preparing a sword instead of a gift. We will come back to him and his evil designs, but first let's look at the actual birth of this unique child Jesus.

Surprise in a Manger

The mother of Jesus was named Mary. Awhile before the Wisemen had come, she and her husband had made the difficult trip of 140 kilometers to the town of Bethlehem. The trip on the back of a donkey had been painful because Mary was pregnant and about to deliver. The King had demanded that everyone return to the place of his ancestor's birth for a census. This is why Joseph, Mary's husband, had been forced to travel to Bethlehem during the late stage of his wife's pregnancy.

When they arrived, they searched everywhere for a guest house to stay in since they had no relatives living there. So many people were visiting the town that there was no room to rent anywhere. Mary began to have labor pains and Joseph desperately pleaded for a room. No one took pity on them. Perhaps they didn't have enough money to convince the innkeepers. As often happens, people were more concerned about profit than people in need.

Finally, one man allowed them to use his animal stable. Mary lay down on the straw exhausted. There was no midwife, no doctor or family to help her. Instead she was surrounded by animals. She gave birth to a son, wrapped him tenderly in strips of cloth, and soothed him to sleep beside her on the straw.

Hardly anyone noticed the birth, yet today, in many nations around the world, this story is acted out in plays and the story is told over and over. In many places you can see sculptures of the manger scene with cattle and sheep peering in at the tired mother with her precious baby bundled on the straw.

Why would someone born in poverty attract such attention? When the Wisemen brought their expensive gifts and worshipped baby Jesus, the villagers stared in surprise. All they could see was a very poor family. They didn't know that the compassionate Savior had taken a human body. No wonder the Wisemen treated Jesus like royalty!

An Angel with a Startling Message

Months before, Mary had become engaged to Joseph a carpenter. Shortly after, something very unusual happened. An angel appeared to Mary. She was very frightened. The angel reassured her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High."

Mary wondered what the angel could possibly mean. The religion of her country was very strict. Immorality was uncommon. "How can this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" The angel answered, "Nothing is impossible with God. The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the

power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God.”

It sounded so strange, so unbelievable. Mary, however, remembered the prophecies in the ancient scriptures that promised the Savior would be born miraculously to a virgin. Could God have chosen her? Was God finally fulfilling His promise to bring wisdom, peace, and salvation to this war-torn world?

Mary knew she was not dreaming. An angel truly was speaking to her. Her fear and questions fell away. “I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May it be to me as you have said.” Then the angel left her.

Can you imagine how Mary must have felt? Surely she was excited to know she had been chosen to receive the Savior for whom so many were eagerly waiting. At the same time, she must have been concerned about what people would say. Would anyone believe her when she told them she was pregnant through God’s power? Would her fiancé think she had been unfaithful?

When Joseph heard, he was very upset. He had trusted Mary to be a pure and loyal girl. He was disappointed and shamed to hear she was pregnant. However, Joseph’s heart was kind. He didn’t want to disgrace her publicly. He planned to break the engagement privately.

That night, an angel appeared to him in a dream saying, “Joseph, don’t be afraid to take Mary as your wife. This baby is truly conceived by the Holy Spirit. She will have a son. Name Him Jesus, because this name means the One who saves people from their sins.”

Amazed at God’s special plan, Joseph’s disappointment and shame left him. He chose to take Mary as his wife. They eagerly waited to see what would become of this miraculous child.

A Time for Singing

Have you heard people singing at Christmas time? There are hundreds of special Christmas carols that people sing to celebrate this amazing story. The singing goes back in history clear to the night of Jesus’ birth out in the open fields.

Some of the poorest people in the country of Israel were shepherds. They often slept outside to protect their sheep. On the night of Jesus’ birth a group of shepherds suddenly came running through the streets from outside the town where they’d been watching the sheep. They shouted to everyone they met along the road, “An important baby has been born tonight! We were startled by a bright light and suddenly saw an angel appear. He said to us, ‘Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David (Bethlehem) a Savior has been born to you, he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.’”

The shepherds said that after this amazing announcement, many angels appeared in the sky singing incredibly beautiful songs. Today, no one knows the tune, but some of the words have been recorded. They were, “Glory to God in the highest and on earth, peace, good-will to men.” There is something in the birth of this child that makes people want to write new songs and sing. That is why we hear so many special songs at Christmas time.

The shepherds found baby Jesus wrapped in pieces of cloth, laying in a manger, just as the angel had said. They bowed to worship Him, in awe that this special child would be born to a poor family and that the news had been told to poor people such as themselves.

This was the very reason that Jesus had chosen to be born in such a humble way. He had given up the peacefulness and beauty of heaven to experience the hardship and poverty of humans. He had come to share their suffering and provide a way of escape. If He had been born in a palace, the poor might have feared to approach Him. He wanted everyone to come near and learn of God's compassion. He was like a king, going among his peasants, to understand their difficulties and to help them improve their lives.

So it was that the wealthy Wisemen and the poor shepherds both recognized that someone very special had come to earth.

An Angry King and a Close Escape

King Herod was anxiously waiting to hear back from the Wisemen. However, as the Wisemen slept, an angel also appeared to them and told them to go back to their country using a different route. They were not to tell King Herod.

The angel woke Joseph and urged him to flee with Mary and Jesus to the country of Egypt since Herod would try to kill the baby.

When King Herod realized the Wisemen had tricked him, his fear grew to intense anger and he ordered soldiers to search for and kill all the baby boys, two-years old and younger. Death, heartache, and deep sorrow ripped across the countryside. Herod's selfishness and greed caused intense suffering just like it often causes misery and distress today.

The baby Jesus escaped Herod's wicked plotting. Nothing could destroy God's plan. Jesus was safely hidden in the country of Egypt. Time passed and Herod died. An angel once again appeared to Joseph telling him to return to Israel where Jesus would grow up to live out the special purposes for which He'd come to earth. In a few years Jesus' wise preaching and miracles of healing would attract thousands. Soon afterwards, jealous and corrupt leaders would crucify Him on a cross. Then five hundred of His followers would take the news throughout the world that Jesus had risen from the dead and was alive to still help people. But those are stories for another time.

Will You be Like Herod or Jesus?

The celebration of Christmas invites us to choose the qualities of Jesus and the Wisemen instead of Herod. When King Herod died there was no one who mourned his death except his immediate family. In fact his subjects were happy the king had died because he was very unkind and overly selfish. Today, very few people know his name or his accomplishments.

On the other hand, millions know the name Jesus Christ from which we get the word Christmas. They honor Jesus whose name means "the one set apart to rescue and heal." Jesus became known as a great teacher. His parables, stories, and sayings have been translated into hundreds of languages. His acts of compassion for the poor and the sick have inspired millions. He lived to help others and not for His own interests.

We also must choose which way we will live. Will we seek our own pleasures and positions of power like Herod? Or will we choose to help others and to sacrifice time and money to make our

families, our villages and our country a place of peace? Great blessings come through those who choose self-sacrifice and kindness instead of greed and selfishness.

Christmas reminds us that choosing the way of Jesus brings peace and happiness. We can start on the right path by choosing to do one simple act of kindness this week. Why don't we try it and see what will happen. Surely we'll find great joy in this. It is the right thing to do.

It is true that in many places the real meaning of Christmas has been forgotten. Businesses use this holiday to make money, entice people to buy all kinds of useless things, while poor people go hungry or freeze in the mountains without adequate houses and blankets.

Made-up stories about Santa Clause and flying reindeer are more frequently heard on television than the true story of Jesus' birth. We can see how easily greed and foolishness crowd out the qualities of true beauty, wisdom and nobility. But it does not need to be that way for us.

Now that we understand more about Christmas, we can gain a lot from its meaning. Here's a short summary list.

1. Twinkling lights and stars. We can be like the Wisemen and search the ancient scriptures to know its prophecies and follow its words of truth.
2. Joyful Christmas songs. The song said, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace and good will to men." We can be like the shepherds, seeking peace and good will by sharing good news. We can be like the angels by giving honor and thanks to the God who has power to help us forgive our enemies and choose kindness instead of hatred.
3. Christmas—named after Jesus Christ. When we hear the word Christmas we can remember the meaning of the name Jesus Christ, "the one set apart to rescue and heal." We can join millions of others in honoring His special life, His teachings and their power for us today.
4. Gifts. We can be like the Wisemen who gave to those in need. We can be like Jesus who didn't seek after honor and position, but chose to give of Himself to help those caught in sorrow and suffering.

So let's join in with those who say, "Merry Christmas!" If they ask what it means, hand them this paper and let them join in to the peace and joy of this holiday.

By Scott Griswold