

Christmas message Why Christmas?

*[Please note : sections in blue type are not broadcast on every radio station.
NKJV Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

Another year has almost come and gone, and here we are looking forward to Christmas time. I know there may still be a thousand and one things to do and a mental list longer than your arm to consider, but just for a few minutes it would be good to pause and to consider what makes Christmas worth celebrating. I would like to do this under four headings. First, Christmas characters, then Christmas items, then Christmas memories and finally Christmas thank you's. As we do this my prayer is that God will enable each one of us to more deeply appreciate Who lies at the heart of Christmas – the wonderful Son of God, our Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Christmas Characters

I remember being woken up one Christmas Eve night when I was very young by the sound of things being put into my stocking. I was too scared to move, so I pretended to be asleep! The following morning, I was convinced I had been awake whilst Santa had been in my bedroom!

Jesus

Whether it is Santa, Rudolph or the panto villain, there are certain characters that are synonymous with Christmas. However, when we look in the Bible and understand the origins of why we celebrate Christmas, we see that Christmas is all about Jesus. But what is so special about this Jesus? What sets Him apart from any other person, celebrity or religious leader? Well, the Bible clearly tells us that Jesus is God! One of Jesus' names, often heard around Christmas time, is 'Immanuel' – which means God with us (Matthew 1:23). This tells us that God came down from Heaven to live on this earth. How incredible is that!

“God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son...” (John 3:16).

He did this because He knows our need. The Apostle Paul could write,

“Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners...” (1 Timothy 1:15).

Jesus was born to die. He always knew that 33 years after His birth He would be crucified on a cross, having done nothing wrong – for you and for me. Because He loved us so much, He did not hide away or choose somebody else instead. No, He left His perfect home in Heaven to live on earth. Taking on human form He experienced hunger, tiredness, emotion and pain just as we do. Jesus was like us in every way apart from one – He was perfect; unable to do or think anything wrong. This is hard for us to fully understand, but the truth of it is that Jesus was - and is - God.

Mary

Mary was the mother of Jesus. There was nothing particularly special about her: you could say that she was an ordinary young woman who was used in an extraordinary way by God. She was engaged to a man called Joseph – again, an ordinary man (a carpenter) who was also to be used

by God. They were two people whose lives were about to be changed by Jesus! It is the same for us. We may not be notable in any way, but Jesus can still change our lives if we let Him. The Bible tells us that Mary and Joseph had not 'come together' as they were not yet married. So, when an angel tells Mary she is pregnant and will give birth to a son (Jesus) who "will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High" (Luke 1:32), Mary asks for an explanation: "How will this be since I am a virgin?" (Luke 1:34). Mary's pregnancy was no ordinary pregnancy. It happened because the Holy Spirit came upon Mary: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you." (Luke 1:35). This is truly incredible - a miracle, only possible with God! This truth is still the same today – "For nothing is impossible with God" (Luke 1:37).

Joseph

Joseph was a righteous, upright and caring man. An angel appeared to him and explained all that was going to happen and told him that he was to marry Mary. Joseph was obedient and, although he was not the biological father of Jesus, he still took care of - and loved - both Mary and Jesus. We also read that Mary and Joseph were told to,

“...Give Him the name Jesus, because He will save His people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21).

The Shepherds

When Jesus was born, the first people to come and see Him were shepherds. In Bible times, shepherds had a poor reputation and were not valued. However, these lowly, ordinary citizens were the first to find and see the baby Jesus. There are no barriers or restrictions with Jesus: He wants everyone to come to Him as their Saviour.

Why do we need a Saviour? The simple answer is that we are all sinners, "for all have sinned" (Romans 3:23) and deserve God's judgement, "the wages of sin is death..." Why do we need to come to Jesus? Jesus said "I am the way...no man comes to the Father but by me" (John 14:6). "Nor is there salvation in any other" (Acts 4:12).

Please do not put off coming to Jesus and trusting in Him. As soon as the shepherds heard about Jesus they hurried off to find Him; there was no delay in their decision to go – it was immediate. The Bible tells us that,

“...Now is the time of God's favour, NOW is the day of salvation” (2 Corinthians 6:2).

Will you put your trust in Jesus now? After visiting Jesus the shepherds then 'spread the word' – they wanted others to know about this great event. If you trust in Jesus and become a Christian, then tell people! Sharing this good news is important.

So, just as I now know the truth about that Christmas Eve night many years ago when I was a young child, I also now know the truth about Jesus. He is the true Saviour of the World, the reason we celebrate Christmas, and He is waiting for you to trust in Him as your Saviour.

Christmas Items

When you hear the word 'Christmas' what comes into your mind? Presents, food, such as turkey or mince pies or the smell of a real Christmas tree? All these items remind me of Christmas. However, things were very different over 2,000 years ago, at the time of the first Christmas, when Jesus was born in Bethlehem. The Roman Emperor at the time, Caesar Augustus, issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. This meant that all those who were living under Roman rule – including Israel, where Mary and Joseph lived – had to return to their ancestral homes which in Joseph's case was Bethlehem.

A Manger

When Mary and Joseph arrived in Bethlehem, they found that many other people had also descended upon the town owing to the census and, because of this there was no place to stay. The baby was due! What would they do? The Bible tells us that, “she gave birth to her firstborn, a Son (Jesus). She wrapped Him in cloths and placed Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn” (Luke 2:7). We often see pictures of the nativity scene where baby Jesus is surrounded by Mary, Joseph and a number of animals in a stable. This may have been true, but the fact is the Bible does not record that Jesus was born in a stable – only that He was placed in a manger. However, the point is this:

Jesus – Immanuel, God with us – left His glory, splendour and majesty in Heaven to be born into poverty. This poverty would mark Jesus while He lived on this earth. He grew up in Nazareth, a town despised by people who questioned “Can anything good come from there?” (John 1:46). When Jesus was older, He did not have a permanent home, often staying with friends or even in the desert: “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man (Jesus) has nowhere to lay His head” (Matthew 8:20).

It is not the way of Jesus to boast and to ‘show-off.’ He is humble, meek and lowly, choosing to make Himself nothing and of no reputation. These characteristics - in conjunction with His great love for you and me - resulted in Him becoming obedient to death, even death on a Roman cross; a cruel death, totally underserved, but one which He chose in order to save us. Because of this, if you:

“Confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved” (Romans 10:9).

The Apostle Paul writes,

“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich” (2 Corinthians 8:9).

God has not only raised Him from the dead but has also exalted Him to the highest place -

“Given Him the Name which is above every Name,” (Philippians 2:9).

What a contrast this is, from the manger and the cross - to the highest place. One day Jesus Himself will come back to reign as Lord and King on this earth. Then, in Heaven, He will forever be the centre of all praise and worship for Who He is and for what He accomplished when He came to earth as a man.

Presents

We all enjoy giving and receiving presents at Christmas time. Jesus, too, received gifts from wise men who had travelled many miles to see Him. Although we are not told how many wise men there were, what we do know is that they brought with them three gifts.

Gold speaks of Jesus’ kingship. Gold shines brightly, and this also illustrates Jesus as the brightness of God’s glory.

Frankincense speaks of His Deity – the fact that Jesus is of God; He is divine. Frankincense itself is an aromatic resin used in perfumes; its whiteness and sweet fragrance express the purity of the sinless Christ and the delight that God has in His Son, Jesus.

Myrrh is a sap like substance which has been used as a perfume, incense and medicine. This gift

would illustrate Jesus' manhood. Its bitter taste and sweet fragrance speak of His sufferings and death and the blessings that would result from it. How amazing that these wise men brought such gifts to Jesus and how the meaning of these gifts is seen so evidently and perfectly in the life of Jesus.

So, when you are opening your presents, enjoying the turkey or when you see a Christmas tree decorated with brightly coloured tinsel and baubles, just remember that however lovely these Christmas items are, there is so much more to Christmas! The manger and the three gifts given to Jesus that first Christmas speak of the One who left the glory in Heaven to be born as man and who lived, died and was raised, so that we might have new life in Him.

Christmas Memories

Amongst the many songs written about Christmas is a line which says, 'it's the most wonderful time of year.' Although I know that is not true for everyone, for me, Christmas is a special time of the year. Much of that is based on the happy memories I have growing up – Christmas time was always very special.

Mary's Memories

I often wonder what Mary, the mother of Jesus, thought of everything that was happening. First the angel Gabriel appeared to her and told her that she, a virgin, was going to have a baby; this baby would be God's Son; and she was to give Him the name, Jesus! Then, after the birth, shepherds visited and, later, some wise men followed a star and presented significant gifts to Jesus. Could you imagine all this happening to you?

We read in the Bible of Mary's faith and obedience when she responds to the angel Gabriel with the words, "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said" (Luke 1:38). She praises God for His goodness and mercy, and His work in her. Then, after Jesus has been born and is visited by the shepherds, we read something very special:

"Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart"
(Luke 2:19).

She treasured these memories.

The world we live in is very fast paced. Advances in technology have created an 'instant' culture, where we expect things straight away. This culture does not encourage us to take time to properly contemplate or treasure the things that are important to us. In contrast, that is why Mary's reaction is so lovely. She knew something of the preciousness of the baby Who lay in the manger. She appreciated the privilege and responsibility given to her by God to take care of Him. And she realised how she herself had been changed by Jesus.

Our memories

I hope this Christmas season – in amongst all the busyness and excitement – that you can think about its true meaning, and by doing so are able to realise the preciousness of the Lord Jesus, the One who was born to be the Saviour of the world, and 'treasure up these things in your heart.' What a memory you could create this Christmas time if you accepted Jesus as your own personal Saviour!

I am sure we can all remember certain presents that we have received and who gave them to us. We still appreciate their care and cost. However, there is a gift – the most amazing and costliest gift anybody could ever receive – which only some people have taken hold of and actually opened, yet it is available to everybody! That gift is Jesus and the eternal life He offers:

"For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that

whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

All the gifts that are given at Christmas are temporary; they will not last forever. However, the gift that is Jesus and the life He can give us is eternal – it will last forever! If you accept Jesus as your Saviour then – like the shepherds who searched for, found and accepted Jesus and like many millions of people who have believed in Jesus – you can praise God and exclaim, “thanks be to God for His indescribable gift” (2 Corinthians 9:15).

Another memory I have of Christmas is the special treats: chocolates on the tree, selection boxes, a big sweet jar on the sideboard. However, even though I knew these Christmas treats were for me, I was allowed them only at certain times, like after meals or if I had earned them. Those treats tasted so nice, but they always left me wanting more! You have heard the good news message of the first Christmas, and you have heard that the gift of eternal life can be yours when you believe in the Lord Jesus and put your trust in Him. This gift is free and cannot be earned. Will you, then, choose to accept Jesus as your Saviour and receive the blessings which - unlike my Christmas treats - will never end? They never disappoint. I ask you to “taste and see that the LORD is good” (Psalm 34:8); His promises never fail. “For the LORD your God will bless you as He has promised” (Deuteronomy 15:6).

Christmas Thank you's

I don't know about you, but one of the things I least liked about Christmas was the fact that I was made to write a list of people who had given us a present. I would then have to write them a thank you letter. I was usually shown a little grace so this would be a job for boxing day, or the day after! I can still remember the words “If you are not thankful for the present, we can put it in the bin and then you wont have to write a letter!” I realise now the wisdom of my parents' actions, as sometimes we have been given a present and never known if it arrived, or perhaps only found out when a cheque was cashed. Perhaps I am just showing my age, but I think that we live in a far less thankful society today, when the simple act of saying thank you has been much neglected. In many ways it has never been easier with text messages, emails and the like.

As Christians, we should be the most thankful people ever. We have so much cause to be thankful. Paul could exclaim to the Christians in Corinth: “thanks be to God for His indescribable gift” (2 Corinthians 9:15). As we consider the Baby of Bethlehem this Christmas time let Him be the reason why we are so deeply thankful to God. I, as a father, cannot begin to imagine what it cost God, the heavenly Father, to send His well-beloved Son into this world, knowing that Jesus would be rejected and crucified. This is an emotion, a pain, beyond my finite ability to grasp. However, the truth of it should cause me to be thankful daily to Him. His love for me, His wisdom to do all that is right is beyond question, even when I do not understand His ways in the confusions of life.

However, Christmas should not just be a reminder to be thankful to God for sending His Son to be the Saviour of the world. It should also be a cause for a general sense of thankfulness in our hearts.

“For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer” (1 Timothy 4:4 &5).

Sometimes we may feel a little bit guilty at this time of year. We have spent too much, we have eaten too much, we have lounged about lazily too much. Now, we ought to have a proper concern for others who find Christmas lonely and difficult. However, we can with thanksgiving enjoy the good things of this life, recognising the true Source of all that we have. After all, it was God who made the cocoa plant from which we get our chocolate!

“Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Colossians 3:16 &17).

Perhaps at this time of year, more than at any other time of year, people sing. Let us think about the words of the Carols we sing and use them as a real basis for being thankful.

“Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus” (1 Thessalonians 5:18).

We sometimes struggle to know the will of God for our lives – but here it is in plain black and white! How good it would be if I was as thankful towards the middle of January as I am on Christmas Day! How right it is when I am thankful for those who love me, my family, my fellow believers, even if they don’t get me just what I really wanted. Normal Christianity is based on thankfulness and should keep us from moaning and grumbling.

“Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe” (Hebrews 12:28).

Giving and receiving of presents is an integral part of Christmas. Sometimes it works better than others. However, we have something far better to look forward to and this should be the cause of lasting thankfulness. I do not think that I have any of the presents that I was given as a child. Most broke, were consumed or just fell out of favour. However, that which God has for us is eternal and will never become stale. No matter how good this Christmas may be, each and every believer has something far better to look forward to. Forever Christmas and never Boxing Day!

“Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God” (Philippians 4:6).

The bright lights and buzz of Christmas may be able to distract us from the realities of life but before long the worries and anxieties will crowd back. Thanksgiving is an integral part of the pathway to a calmer more peaceful life. As we focus on all that God has done and all that He is doing and will do in a day to come and allow this to make us to be thankful, we will find that the frustrations and anxieties of life will diminish. Thank you is always the right response to God! I wish you a very happy Christmas and trust that you have a peaceful time whatever your situation may be. But, ask yourself: ‘Why Christmas?’ My prayer is that you will know the Lord Jesus as your own personal Saviour and that you may have an appreciation of the first Christmas when Jesus - God with us - was born.

Thank you for listening to this Truth for Today Christmas broadcast, talk number T1386. This talk is largely based upon the Gospel tract Why Christmas? by Peter Baxter, which is available, free of charge, from Emmaus Bible School UK: office@emmausuk.com

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