

WHAT SHOULD WE DO WITH CHRISTMAS?

We think it's familiar and that we know all about it. But here, at the beginning, is basis of the story (Luke 2:1-20):

¹*In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world.* ²*(This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.)* ³*And everyone went to his own town to register.*

⁴*So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David.* ⁵*He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child.* ⁶*While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born,* ⁷*and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.*

⁸*And there were shepherds living out in the fields near by, keeping watch over their flocks at night.* ⁹*An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.* ¹⁰*But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.* ¹¹*Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.* ¹²*This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."*

¹³*Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,* ¹⁴*"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favour rests."*

¹⁵*When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."*

¹⁶*So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger.* ¹⁷*When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child,* ¹⁸*and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.* ¹⁹*But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.* ²⁰*The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.*

What have we done with Christmas?

We've *commercialised* it. The evidence is around for all to see.

We've *dramatised* it. A lot has been read in to the verses above. Every Nativity Play depicting Mary and Joseph trudging unsuccessfully from inn to inn in search of accommodation—until finally one kind-hearted but full-up innkeeper offers his stable—is entirely based on the last phrase of verse 7, "*there was no room for them in the inn*"!

We've *romanticised* it. To many today, the word "manger" is a term for the type of cradle into which to place a Messiah when He's born! (If you're one of them, look up the word in a dictionary!)

We've *synthesised* it. We have images of Christmas all merged together. There in the centre is the Baby Jesus with His devoted parents around the tree. On the one

side are the three shepherds, humble and kneeling. On the other side are the three wise men in their resplendent robes and festal finery (even though they arrived up to two years later!). In the background, in the soft focus and sweet-smelling straw, the animals look silently on. Overhead in the glittering starlight, snowmen are flying. And, along with Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer, the jolly figure of Santa Claus arrives with a "Ho! Ho! Ho!", while the skies are filled with angels singing "Jingle Bells"!

Somewhere in it all, Jesus is born! And the message of Christmas is the message of His birth.

In view of all the secularisation, and on the other hand in view of all the debunking there is in what Jack Hayford famously called "the spirit of holy humbug", what should we do with Christmas? How should we respond?

We should respond with joy

It was a night like any other: dark, clear, routine. The people had a high Messianic expectation, but they weren't on the lookout for angels! Yet suddenly an angel appeared in the light of the glory of God and with the good news of great *joy*, together with a whole army of praising angels.

On that significant night, all the years and all the prophecies from Genesis 3:16 on were coming to fulfilment. Heaven was rejoicing, and the celebration broke through on earth—a wondrous and unique drama co-featuring angels and men.

It was the greatest event in history to date, and almost everybody missed it! It went unnoticed by Herod; unnoticed by the Romans, even though God used their census to bring it about; unnoticed by the Jewish leaders, who knew all the *facts*, but missed the *fulfilment*; unnoticed by the ordinary Jews. And yet it was witnessed: it was witnessed by the lowly and despised shepherds; witnessed by Mary and Joseph; witnessed by Simeon and Anna; and later by the Magi.

All the witnesses knew the joy the angel mentioned! The only reason not to rejoice about Christmas is that we don't know about it! We should respond with *joy*!

We should respond with wonder

Verse 11 teems with meaning: *a Saviour has been born who is Christ (Messiah) the Lord* (a name used by the Jews for God, and by the Greeks for kings whom they hailed as gods). A Saviour *saves*, a Lord is *served*. A Saviour *offers* service, a Lord *demands* it. Yet here we see the Lordship of the Saviour, the greatness of humility, the Majesty of service—Almighty God born in a stable!

Songwriters have attempted to capture the paradox. Charles Wesley wrote:

*Our God contracted to a span,
Incomprehensibly made man.*

and again:

*Veiled in flesh the Godhead see;
Hail the incarnate Deity!*

Graham Kendrick wrote:

*Oh what a mystery,
Meekness and Majesty*

and Michael Card:

*And so the Light became alive, and manna became Man.
Eternity stepped into time so we could understand.*

Like Mary, we can treasure up these things and ponder them in our heart. And we should respond with *wonder*!

We should respond with proclamation

In verse 17, we see that the shepherds, the first men to know apart from the family, responded with proclamation. Having seen, they proclaimed what had been proclaimed to *them*. And it was a *past tense* proclamation—"a Saviour has been born". This is not some wild-eyed wishful speculation, but is based on hard demonstrable fact. Like the shepherds, we can see for ourselves. In verse 12, they were given a sign, a sign that we *miss* because we forget what "manger" means. It was *unusual* to find a newborn baby placed in an animal's feeding trough! Our gospel proclamation today is not wishful thinking, but is confident hope based on historical *fact*.

So we rejoice, and we experience wonder—and also we *proclaim*. We should respond with *proclamation*.

We should respond with praise and worship

The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told. Lk 2:20

Every detail of Scripture is important. It wasn't just the words they had heard, even angelic words. They had *seen*—it had become *real* to them. Therefore they praised God out of personal revelation of the truth—and so should we!

It was just one night. Apart from Simeon and Anna and the Magi, the next episode of the drama would not be for another thirty years! The angel had said, "*I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people*" (Lk 2:10). We may wonder if any of the shepherds would still be alive then ... of course we don't know. But as the events of that night faded into a happy memory, and now thirty years must pass before the next instalment, all they—and all we—can do is to glorify and praise God. And to do so out of a personal revelation of the truth—because it's become real to *us*.

So we dwell on the memory of this Christmas event, for it leads us to respond with *praise and worship*.

This Christmas, don't be caught in the commercialisation, and neither be carping or critical. But respond with *joy*, with *wonder*, with *proclamation*, with *praise and worship*—glorifying the God who came!

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Note: All Bible quotations are NIV unless otherwise stated.