

Understanding Christmas

December 19 - 20

The Promise of Christmas

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Introduction:

This week, we celebrate Christmas, the birth of Jesus Christ. It's almost certain that Jesus was not born on December 25, that date comes more from pagan celebrations than from any historical research, but nonetheless, the Christmas season is a great time to stop and reflect on the history changing, life changing coming of Messiah.

In Luke 1:5-2:8, Luke writes of a series of events in chronological order.

I.

The
conception of John the Baptist • [_Luke 1:5-25](#)

By our calendar it is now about 5 BC. It has been 400 years since the Jews have heard from God. Think about it – 400 years! If you think of where we are, 400 years ago would put us at 1609!

Despite the complete lack of a prophetic word, the

Jews have continued to worship God in the prescribed way. They have offered sacrifices and they have celebrated feast days that tie them with their forefathers 1,200 years earlier when Moses established them!

The Jews have been scattered twice: The Northern Kingdom by the Assyrians and the Southern Kingdom of Judah by the Babylonians. They have been witness to the 4 great world empires –Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and now Rome. These are the 4 empires that Daniel spoke of his great prophecies of Daniel 2 & 7.

The story begins with an man, 60 years old by the name of Zacharias. Zacharias is a priest and he is married to a woman who is from a priestly family. With all their blessings, one great pain of their lives was that Elizabeth was unable to have children.

It was June of 5 BC when Zacharias learned that he was going to receive a great honor. He was in a group of priests who were to serve the temple for 2 weeks, and his name was chosen by lot to enter the Temple and burn incense before the Lord. This was literally a once in a lifetime opportunity for a priest like Zacharias. The weeks the priests of Abijah were to care for the Temple were the week before Pentecost and the week of Pentecost. This year that would have been the 2 weeks

of June 3-17

Luke 1:8-20 (NLT)_⁸ One day Zechariah was serving God in the Temple, for his order was on duty that week. ⁹ As was the custom of the priests, he was chosen by lot to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and burn incense. ¹⁰ While the incense was being burned, a great crowd stood outside, praying. ¹¹ While Zechariah was in the sanctuary, an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the incense altar. ¹² Zechariah was shaken and overwhelmed with fear when he saw him. ¹³ But the angel said, “Don’t be afraid, Zechariah! God has heard your prayer. Your wife, Elizabeth, will give you a son, and you are to name him John. ¹⁴ You will have great joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵ for he will be great in the eyes of the Lord. He must never touch wine or other alcoholic drinks. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even before his birth. ¹⁶ And he will turn many Israelites to the Lord their God. ¹⁷ He will be a man with the spirit and power of Elijah. He will prepare the people for the coming of the Lord. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and he will cause those who are rebellious to accept the wisdom of the godly.” ¹⁸ Zechariah said to the angel, “How can I be sure this will happen? I’m an old man now, and my wife is also well along in years.” ¹⁹ Then the angel said, “I am Gabriel! I stand in the very presence of God. It was he who sent me to bring you this good news! ²⁰ But now, since you didn’t believe what I said, you will be silent and

unable to speak until the child is born. For my words will certainly be fulfilled at the proper time.”

This appearance of the angel terrified Zacharias, but it had to have touched him deeply that after all these years, God was going to hear his request and give him a child.

Luke 1:21-25 (NLT)²¹ Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah to come out of the sanctuary, wondering why he was taking so long.²² When he finally did come out, he couldn't speak to them. Then they realized from his gestures and his silence that he must have seen a vision in the sanctuary.²³ When Zechariah's week of service in the Temple was over, he returned home.²⁴ Soon afterward his wife, Elizabeth, became pregnant and went into seclusion for five months.²⁵ “How kind the Lord is!” she exclaimed. “He has taken away my disgrace of having no children.”

Elizabeth conceived shortly after they returned, most likely in the last 2 weeks of June.

II.

The

conception of Jesus • Luke 1:26-38

It's now December of 05 BC. Elizabeth is 6 months along. About 80 miles north in the area of Galilee, another angel, Gabriel appears to Mary

Luke 1:26-38 (NLT)²⁶ In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a village in Galilee,²⁷ to a virgin named Mary. She was engaged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of King David.²⁸ Gabriel appeared to her and said, "Greetings, favored woman! The Lord is with you!"²⁹ Confused and disturbed, Mary tried to think what the angel could mean.³⁰ "Don't be afraid, Mary," the angel told her, "for you have found favor with God!³¹ You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus.³² He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David.³³ And he will reign over Israel forever; his Kingdom will never end!"³⁴ Mary asked the angel, "But how can this happen? I am a virgin."

35 The angel replied, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the baby to be born will be holy, and he will be called the Son of God.³⁶ What's more, your relative Elizabeth has become pregnant in her old age! People used to say she was barren, but she's now in her sixth month.³⁷ For nothing is impossible with God."³⁸ Mary responded, "I am the Lord's servant. May everything you have said about me come true." And then the angel left her.

What an amazing, confusing, scary time this must have been for a young woman. Mary was probably between

14 & 16 years old. She is not married yet, and this Angel tells her that she is going to have a child. The thrill of knowing that she is going to be the Mother of the Messiah goes along with the anxiety of *who is going to believe me*. But all of that is set aside by faith as Mary submits to the Lord as his servant.

III.

Mary's

visit to Elizabeth • Luke 1:39-56

Luke 1:39-45 (NLT)³⁹ A few days later Mary hurried to the hill country of Judea, to the town⁴⁰ where Zechariah lived. She entered the house and greeted Elizabeth.⁴¹ At the sound of Mary's greeting, Elizabeth's child leaped within her, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.⁴² Elizabeth gave a glad cry and exclaimed to Mary, "God has blessed you above all women, and your child is blessed.⁴³ Why am I so honored, that the mother of my Lord should visit me?⁴⁴ When I heard your greeting, the baby in my womb jumped for joy.⁴⁵ You are blessed because you believed that the Lord would do what he said."

IV.

The

birth of John the Baptist • Luke 1:57-60

Luke 1:57-60 (NLT)⁵⁷ When it was time for Elizabeth's baby to be born, she gave birth to a son.⁵⁸ And when her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had been very merciful to her,

everyone rejoiced with her. ⁵⁹ When the baby was eight days old, they all came for the circumcision ceremony. They wanted to name him Zechariah, after his father. ⁶⁰ But Elizabeth said, “No! His name is John!”

John was born in about March of 4 BC.

Wow! What an amazing time this must have been.

People were buzzing according to verse 65-66

Luke 1:65-66 (NLT) ⁶⁵ Awe fell upon the whole neighborhood, and the news of what had happened spread throughout the Judean hills. ⁶⁶ Everyone who heard about it reflected on these events and asked, “What will this child turn out to be?” For the hand of the Lord was surely upon him in a special way.

His father makes this prophecy of John

Luke 1:76-79 (NLT) ⁷⁶ “And you, my little son, will be called the prophet of the Most High, because you will prepare the way for the Lord. ⁷⁷ You will tell his people how to find salvation through forgiveness of their sins. ⁷⁸ Because of God’s tender mercy, the morning light from heaven is about to break upon us, ⁷⁹ to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, and to guide us to the path of peace.”

V.

The
visit of the Angel to Joseph • Matthew 1:18-25

Matthew 1:18-25 (NLT)¹⁸ This is how Jesus the Messiah was born. His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. But before the marriage took place, while she was still a virgin, she became pregnant through the power of the Holy Spirit.¹⁹ Joseph, her fiancé, was a good man and did not want to disgrace her publicly, so he decided to break the engagement quietly.²⁰ As he considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. “Joseph, son of David,” the angel said, “do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. For the child within her was conceived by the Holy Spirit.²¹ And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”²² All of this occurred to fulfill the Lord’s message through his prophet:²³ “Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel, which means ‘God is with us.’ ”²⁴ When Joseph woke up, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded and took Mary as his wife.²⁵ But he did not have sexual relations with her until her son was born. And Joseph named him Jesus.

We don’t know exactly when this took place. It could have been when Mary returned from her visit to Elizabeth and even with her loose robes began to show the fact that she was pregnant.

Who could even guess of the conversations that took place between Joseph, Mary’s parents, and Mary herself? Did Mary try to convince them all that she was still a virgin and that God had made her pregnant????

Or did she just keep quiet, realizing that this would be a hopeless task?

Joseph was considering what to do and had decided to divorce (break off the engagement) her quietly so he wouldn't have to publicly humiliate her.

Enters the only one who could have convinced him: An Angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. The angel goes back to Isaiah 7:14 to show Joseph that Mary will be the fulfillment of a prophecy made over 700 years earlier.

Joseph, like Mary, proves himself to be a servant of the Lord and even though he subjects himself to scorn and humiliation, he takes Mary as his wife and keeps her a virgin until she gives birth to Jesus.

VI.

The

birth of Jesus Luke 2:1-17

There are many reasons we know that December 25 couldn't have been the birthday of Jesus and Luke the historian provides us with the evidence we need.

First, counting the time from the appearance of the angel to Zacharias, it comes to September, not December.

Second, the fact that the Shepherds were watching their sheep outside in the night shows that it couldn't have been December. Once October hit and the rainy season came and the temperatures plummeted, the shepherds kept their sheep protected from the elements. They didn't allow them to graze at night.

Third, the time for taxes in those days was at harvest time in the Fall, because it was easiest to take the payment which usually came in the form of grain or produce.

It's now about September of 04 BC. Mary is 9 months pregnant and a Caesar living hundreds of miles away makes a decree that causes the fulfillment of prophecy made nearly 500 years earlier.

Micah 5:2 (NLT)² But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, are only a small village among all the people of Judah. Yet a ruler of Israel will come from you, one whose origins are from the distant past.

Caesar had no idea he was fulfilling prophecy. He just wanted more money (that's why they always took censuses). So Joseph, being in the line of David, had to travel with his wife from Nazareth which was their home to Bethlehem, the city of David.

For 3 agonizing days, Joseph and Mary traveled by foot

to Bethlehem only to find that there was no place for them to stay. They finally found someone who would let them stay with their animals, and it was there among the stench, the hay, and the animals that Mary gave birth to Jesus. His first bed was a stone feeding trough.

VII.

The visit of the Shepherds and the Magi • Luke 2:8-20; Matthew 2:1-12

That night, the angels continued their work of announcing the coming of Messiah. They didn't visit a synagogue, they didn't go to the religious leaders, they went to some simple social outcasts – shepherds. Shepherds were outcasts because of the fact that their occupation made them unclean in the eyes of Jewish law.

Why did the angels visit these shepherds? It's obvious by their reaction that they were people of faith.

Luke 2:15-20 (NLT)¹⁵ When the angels had returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, "Let's go to Bethlehem! Let's see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."¹⁶ They hurried to the village and found Mary and Joseph. And there was the baby, lying in the manger.¹⁷ After seeing him, the shepherds told everyone what had happened and what the

angel had said to them about this child. ¹⁸ All who heard the shepherds' story were astonished, ¹⁹ but Mary kept all these things in her heart and thought about them often. ²⁰ The shepherds went back to their flocks, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. It was just as the angel had told them.

We don't know when the Magi came, but probably, it was soon after the birth of Jesus. Joseph and Mary wouldn't have hung around Bethlehem too long. They would have stayed for the census and taken off for home after that.

The Magi had travelled hundreds of miles in a Caravan to worship the King of the Jews. Interesting in verse 4-6, the Jews knew exactly where Messiah was to be born, but even though it was a mere 5 mile journey, none of the priests or other religious leaders even bothered to accompany these men who had travelled hundreds of miles.

One other thing: These religious leaders had to have heard about the occurrences surrounding the birth of John the Baptist! They had to know that something big was happening. Herod wanted to destroy the King, but the religious leaders of Israel wanted to ignore the King!

Notice, these Magi did not celebrate the birth of Christ

by giving gifts to each other, they celebrated the birth of Christ by giving gifts to their king!

Conclusion: Celebrating Christmas as followers of Jesus

So why do I take all this time to walk through the historical events of Christmas?

What does it matter that December 25 is not the date of the birth of Christ?

I want to share some thoughts

The early church never celebrated the birth of Christ. They never venerated Mary as something more than who she was. She was a humble, godly woman who allowed herself to be used to bring the Messiah into this world.

Interesting, the last thing we hear of Mary is in Acts 1, when she is meeting with the other followers of Jesus praying, awaiting the gift of the Holy Spirit. After that, she lives the rest of her life in obscurity with the Apostle John taking care of her.

December 25 became the official day of Christmas in

354 AD when some pope made a declaration.

Why did they choose that day? Because this date coincided with the date of the Pagan Celebration of their sun God and Mithras, a popular Persian sun god was supposedly born on December 25. This made it easy for Christians to declare a empire wide day for this celebration.

Why December 25? It's the winter solstice the day when the days begin to get longer – that's why people regarded it as the birth of the sun god.

So what should we do? Should we stop celebrating Christmas?

I would encourage you to get a little counter-culture when it comes to your Christmas celebration.

First, parents, don't get wrapped up in the mythology of Christmas. Santa, reindeers, Christmas eve cookies and milk left at the chimney.

The problem is you become the source of deception to your children. All year long, you teach them to tell the truth, but when they are old enough to realize for themselves, they discover that you have been a willing, intentional source of falsehood.

Another problem is, you can actually wind up casting doubt on the reality of Jesus Christ. If your children discover that you made up stories about Santa Claus, why shouldn't they also conclude that you have made up stories about Jesus?

The thing that bugged me is I was encouraging my kids to feel gratefulness towards someone who doesn't exist.

Finally, don't get carried away.

I think its fine to have a Christmas tree, exchange gifts, and sing carols. But is Jesus truly honored if we get carried away, stressed out, and in debt because of overdoing the "Christmas Season"?

I would encourage you focus your celebration on family and sharing gifts with the poor rather than purchasing extravagant gifts for each other.

The Spirit of Christmas is not about giving gifts to each other. Jesus Christ came to give to us when we could give nothing back to him! The Spirit of Giving is giving in a way that others cannot give back to you.

Don't worry about some school that is not using a Christmas tree, don't worry about people not saying

Merry Christmas, instead focus on honoring Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior and sharing his truth whenever you have an opportunity.

Christmas ideas for followers of Jesus

- Take time to give thanks to God – give everyone a time to thank God. Give them also a chance to think about the eternal things for which they are thankful.
- Take time to give thanks to God for each other. Think through and then express, what is it that causes you to give thanks when you think of others in your family.
- Go more moderate in your gifts for one another. Take the money and give it as a family to Children's Hunger Fund, World Impact, More than Manna, or some other agency that specifically works with those in need.
- Be aware that for many, Christmas is a time of stress, sadness, or disappointment. Go out of your way to demonstrate love and patience towards them.