

Grace to You :: esp Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time

The People Who Missed Christmas: Jerusalem

Scripture: Luke 2:8–20

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At this time of year we're used to fighting against the tendency to let the busyness of the season blind us to the true meaning of Christmas. It's easy to get preoccupied with the party and completely lose sight of the One we're celebrating.

But that's not merely a modern problem—many people at the time of Christ's birth were too busy to realize what was going on. In fact, virtually the entire city of Jerusalem missed the first Christmas, but not for the reasons you might think.

In the same region there were some shepherds staying out in the fields and keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were terribly frightened. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." . . . So they came in a hurry and found their way to Mary and Joseph, and the baby as He lay in the manger. When they had seen this, they made known the statement which had been told them about this Child. And all who heard it wondered at the things which were told them by the shepherds. . . . The shepherds went back, glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen, just as had been told them. (Luke 2:8-20)

Out of the whole of Jerusalem society, God picked a band of shepherds to hear the news of Jesus' birth. This is intriguing, because shepherds were among the lowest and most despised social groups. The very nature of their work kept them from entering into the mainstream of Israel's society. They couldn't maintain the ceremonial washings and observe all the religious festivals and feasts. Yet these shepherds, close as they were to Jerusalem, were undoubtedly caring for sheep that someday would be used as sacrifices in the temple. How fitting it is that they were the first to know of the Lamb of God!

More significantly, they came to see Him. No one else did. Though these shepherds went back and told everyone what they had seen and heard, and though "all who heard it wondered at the things which were told them by the shepherds" (Luke 2:18), not one other person came to see firsthand. Only some lowly shepherds did not miss Christmas; everyone else in Jerusalem did.

I find it remarkable that Christ was born in Bethlehem and almost no one in Jerusalem took notice. Bethlehem is only a few miles away—literally within walking distance—and Jesus' birth was the fulfillment of all that the nation of Israel had hoped for. But the entire city missed it.

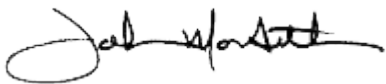
Why did Jerusalem miss Christmas? The answer, in one word, may surprise you: religion. The

people of Jerusalem were very religious. Jerusalem was the hub of religious activity in Israel. The temple was there, and everyone who wanted to make a sacrifice had to come to Jerusalem. The people were so busy with religious ritual that they missed the reality. Consumed with the activity of their feasts and festivals and ceremonies, preoccupied with washings and legal minutiae and other externals, they missed the whole message.

In short, they were busy worshiping the right God in the wrong way. They were caught up in the externals of true religion, but they had abandoned the heart of their faith. Jesus didn't fit their system. They looked for a Messiah who would be a conquering hero, not a baby in a manger. They hoped for a leader who would support their religious system. Jesus opposed everything it stood for. The Sermon on the Mount proved that. He offered truth that would free them from the tyrannical, demanding, oppressive, legalistic religion the scribes and Pharisees had hung on the nation. But the majority of people were so established in their religion that they wouldn't listen.

People like that are the hardest to reach with the good news of salvation. They are so determined to earn their own salvation, to prove they can be righteous on their own, that they cannot see the depth of their poverty.

Religion can be a deadly trap. Ritual and rules enable people to feel spiritual when they are not. I have talked to countless people newly converted to Christ who testify that although they were active in this or that church for years, they never truly knew the reality of salvation. Religious activity is not synonymous with genuine righteousness. Religion will damn people to hell as surely as immorality. In fact, Scripture tells us Satan's ultimate trick is to disguise himself as an angel of light (2 Corinthians 11:14). And so he can use even religion to make people miss Christmas.



(Adapted from [*The Miracle of Christmas*](#).)

Editor's Note: When John MacArthur was recently in studio, we asked him about the importance of Christ's incarnation, and how it relates to true, biblical worship. Here's what he said:

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