

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

Why do so many people miss the real meaning of Christmas?

Scripture: Romans 10:8-11; 2 Corinthians 6:1-2

Code: QA69

The majority of people in the world will miss the next Christmas. But how can that be? How can anyone miss Christmas, given the amount of advertising, publicity, and promotion the holiday receives each year? Because although many celebrate Christmas every year, most don't know what it's about. In spite of all the media promotion of Christmas, the majority of people will miss it because it has become so obscured.

For those of us who know and love the Lord Jesus Christ, Christmas is a time to focus on His birth. But even we can get caught up in the swirl of activity around Christmastime and can miss it in a practical sense. Satan has so cluttered the Christian concept of Christmas with such needless paraphernalia that its true meaning is easily lost.

A Brief History of Christmas

Most scholars doubt that December 25th is the true date of Christ's birth. There is no biblical support for it, and some against it. That date was decided upon by the church in Rome in the fourth century. They had a specific reason for doing so.

Many of the earth's earliest inhabitants were sun worshipers because they depended on the sun's yearly course in the heavens. Most people held feasts at the time of the winter solstice (mid-December), a time when the days were shortest. They built bonfires to give the sun god strength and bring him back to life again. When it became apparent that the days were growing longer, there was great rejoicing.

The fathers of the church in Rome decided to celebrate Christ's birth on the winter solstice. It was their attempt to Christianize the popular pagan celebrations. But they failed to make the people conform. Instead the heathen festivities continued, and we are left with a bizarre marriage of pagan and Christian elements that characterizes our modern celebration of Christmas.

The following examples will give you some idea of how much pagan customs make up what we know as Christmas.

To the Romans the month of December marked the Festival of Saturnalia (Dec. 17-24). One of their most common customs during that festival was giving gifts to one another. As far as we know that is

where the idea of exchanging presents came from. The evergreen wreath also derives from the Saturnalia festival, during which homes were decorated with evergreen boughs.

The Druids of England gathered sacred mistletoe for their ceremonies and decorated their homes with it. It is believed that the first Christmas tree was instituted by Boniface, an English missionary to Germany in the eighth century. He supposedly replaced sacrifices to the god Odin's sacred oak with a fir tree adorned in tribute to Christ. Certain accounts claim that Martin Luther introduced the Christmas tree lighted with candles.

"Santa Claus" is a contraction of St. Nicholas, a bishop in Asia Minor during the fourth century known for his extraordinary generosity. He was later associated with giving presents at the end of the year. St. Nicholas was adopted by the Netherlands as the patron saint of children. On St. Nicholas eve, the children would leave their shoes filled with hay for the saint's white horse.

No wonder so many people miss Christmas. The simplicity of the birth of Christ is drowned in a sea of traditions, many being pagan in origin. Even worse than that, when Christ was born in Bethlehem, most people of that day missed it. In the following gospel accounts, we will see six ways people missed Christmas, and learn how to avoid making the same mistake ourselves.

Ignorant Preoccupation

Luke 2:7 says, "[Mary] gave birth to her firstborn Son, and she wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn." The first person who missed Christmas was the innkeeper. He was unable to take in Mary and Joseph because he had no room for them. Apparently he was indifferent to their plight--there is no indication from Scripture that he called for any help.

Notice that verse 7 says, "She gave birth to her first-born son." Mary herself gave birth to Jesus. By herself she wrapped Him in cloths. Joseph was there to help, but if he was anything like most young fathers, he would have been of little help.

Middle-eastern people are hospitable, kind, and caring. They are not barbaric. They are not the kind of people who would leave a woman alone to have her baby. But in this case, they did. Where were the midwives? You'd think the innkeeper would have known someone who could have helped.

Luke tells us she laid Him in a manger, which is an animal feeding trough. The cloths she wrapped Jesus in were long strips of cloth. Whenever an infant was born, immediately the baby was cleaned. Then the baby's limbs and body would be wrapped in these swaddling cloths and then wrapped in an outer blanket. That was a duty normally carried out by a midwife. But Mary had to do it all herself.

Commentator G. Campbell Morgan wrote,

Think of the pathos of it. "She brought forth;" "she wrapped Him in swaddling clothes." It is very beautiful, but oh, the pity of it, the tragedy of it, the loneliness of it; that in that hour of all hours, when womanhood should be surrounded by the tenderest care, she was alone. The method of the writer is very distinct. She with her own hands wrapped the Baby around with those swaddling cloths, and laid Him in the manger. There was no one to do it for her. Again I say, the pity of it, and yet the glory of it to the heart of Mary (The Gospel According to Luke [Old Tappan, N.J.: Revell, 1931], p. 36).

We don't know anything about the innkeeper because the Bible doesn't say anything about him. Some commentators speculate that Jesus was born in a stable some think He was born in a cave, and others believe he was born in an open courtyard at the inn. One thing we do know: whatever hospitality Mary and Joseph hoped to find, they found none--they were turned away.

Why did the innkeeper miss Christmas? I think the simple answer is preoccupation. He was busy. His inn was full because a census was being held in Bethlehem. The city was bulging with people whose ancestors came from there. Since Bethlehem was the city of David, all those who were in the line of David were there, including Joseph and Mary. The innkeeper wasn't necessarily hostile and unsympathetic; he was just busy.

Many people are like the innkeeper. The chambers of their souls are filled with needless things--with stuff that doesn't matter. As a result, they miss the Christ of God. Our society is filled with the unnecessary, the insignificant, and the meaningless. We spend a fortune to amass things so we can let our children fight over them when we die. And our time is eaten away by the demands our things place on us.

People miss Christ at Christmastime because He is crowded out by a world that dictates what they should think, do, and buy. Like the innkeeper, people today are preoccupied. The innkeeper didn't know anything about the baby Mary gave birth to, and neither do they. They don't know who Christ is and they don't know why He came. Instead, they're ignorantly preoccupied with the mundane and the meaningless. How sad it is that so many people live their lives in pursuit of such, only to wake up one day in eternity without God.

Jealous Fear

In Matthew 2 we meet another man who missed Christmas:

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east, and have come to worship Him." And when Herod the king heard it, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.... Then Herod secretly called the magi, and ascertained from them the time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, "Go and make careful search for the

Child; and when you have found Him, report to me, that I too may come and worship Him" (vv. 1-3, 7-8).

Herod was the king of the land. He feigned his desire to worship Jesus Christ, but he was fearful because One had been born who was called the King of the Jews. The Greek word translated "troubled" in verse three means "to be agitated" or "stirred up." It carries the idea of total panic. Herod panicked. Why? He was afraid of Jesus-afraid of another king. Let's see why.

Julius Caesar appointed Herod's father, Antipater, to be procurator, or governor, of Judea under the Roman occupation. Antipater then managed to have his son Herod appointed prefect of Galilee. In that office Herod was successful in quelling the Jewish guerrilla bands who continued to fight against their foreign rulers.

After fleeing to Egypt when the Parthians invaded Palestine, Herod then went to Rome and in 40 B.C. was declared by Octavian and Antony (with the concurrence of the Roman senate) to be king of the Jews. He invaded Palestine the next year and, after several years of fighting, drove out the Parthians and established his kingdom.

Because he was not Jewish, but Idumean (an Edomite), Herod married Mariamne, heiress to the Jewish Hasmonean house, to make himself more acceptable to the Jews he now ruled. He was a clever and capable warrior, orator, and diplomat. But he also was cruel and merciless. He was incredibly jealous, suspicious, and afraid for his position and power. Fearing a potential threat, he had the high priest Aristobulus, his wife's brother, drowned-after which he provided a magnificent funeral where he pretended to weep. He then had Mariamne herself killed, and then her mother and two of his own sons.

Five days before his death (about a year after Jesus was born) he had a third son executed. One of the greatest evidences of his bloodthirstiness and insane cruelty was having the most distinguished citizens of Jerusalem arrested and imprisoned shortly before his death. Because he knew no one would mourn his own death, he gave orders for those prisoners to be executed the moment he died. Thus he guaranteed that there would be mourning in Jerusalem.

That barbaric act was exceeded in cruelty only by his slaughter of "all the male children who were in Bethlehem and in all its environs, from two years old and under" (Matthew 2:16). By that action he hoped to kill any threat to his throne from the One the magi said had been born King of the Jews.

Why did Herod miss Christmas? Jealous fear. Lest you think there are no more Herods in this world, you need only read the daily newspaper. Man is depraved. There are Herods in every society. But there is a greater lesson for all humanity.

Many people miss Christmas because of the same kind of fear Herod had. Herod was afraid that someone else would take his throne. Today people are fearful of giving up their own plans, priorities, values, and morals. They don't want to come to Christ because He will cramp their style-He will lay claim on their lives. That means they will have to alter the way they live. The media tells people to do their own thing, master their own fate, and chart their own destiny. The world is full of kings who will not kneel before Jesus Christ, so they miss Christmas just like Herod.

What about you? Have you said no to Jesus Christ because you are afraid of the claim He will lay on you? Do you want to be the lord and master of your life and the king of your little kingdom? That's tragic--His kingdom is so much more glorious!

Prideful Indifference

Once Herod learned from the wise men that a child would be born who would be King of the Jews, he gathered "together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, [and] began to inquire of them where the Christ was to be born. And they said to him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it has been written by the prophet, "And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, are by no means least among the leaders of Judah; for out of you shall come forth a Ruler, who will shepherd My people Israel"' (Matthew 2:4-6). Herod called in the experts.

The chief priests consisted of the high priest, the captain of the Temple police, and the best of the other priests--those who had great administrative, teaching, and leadership skills. For the most part the chief priests were Sadducees. The scribes were primarily Pharisees. They were the linguists and interpreters who understood the culture and history of the biblical data.

Those two groups knew where the Messiah was to be born because they knew Micah had prophesied that "Bethlehem was to be His place of birth (5:2). One thing the Jewish nation had been looking for, and still does to this day, was the Messiah. They had been waiting for a deliverer throughout their history, especially while under Roman oppression. However, these priests and scribes were unwilling to travel the few miles to find out if this baby might be the Messiah.

Why did they miss Christmas? Indifference. They didn't care. They had all the facts, but they didn't need a Messiah. Why? Because they were self-righteous-they saw themselves as perfect keepers of the law. In their minds they were all God could ever ask of them. You could say they were filled with proud indifference because indifference is always a result of pride. There was no room for the Son of God in their system. When the grown child arrived on the scene, they hated and despised Him. So they plotted His murder and screamed for His blood.

Jesus pinpointed their indifference in a stinging rebuke from Matthew 9. "I happened that as He was reclining at [the] table in the house, behold many tax-gatherers and sinners came and joined Jesus

and His disciples" (v. 10). Jesus sat down to this meal with people who needed His help: outcasts, tax collectors, traitors, and sinners. "When the Pharisees saw this, they said to His disciples, 'Why does your teacher eat with the tax-gatherers and sinners?' But when He heard this, He said, 'It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are ill. But go and learn what this means, "I desire compassion, and not sacrifice," for I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners"' (vv. 11-13). When the Pharisees held a feast, they invited self-righteous people. When Jesus held a feast, He welcomed those who knew they were sinners and were desperately aware of their need for a Savior.

Many people today miss Christmas because they don't realize they are sinners. Thus they ignore Christ. They don't show any interest in the Savior because they don't understand their need to be saved. They don't understand that the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23)--that sin plummets people into an eternal hell. Consequently they ignore the remedy because they don't even know they have the disease.

Religious Ritual

Luke 2 indicates another group of people who missed Christmas: "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" (vv. 8-9). The angel proclaimed the birth of Christ, and the shepherds went to Bethlehem to see Him. Verse 20 says, "The shepherds went back, glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen, just as had been told them." Out of all the people in Jerusalem, God singled out shepherds to receive the great news about the birth of Christ.

Shepherds were a despised group of people. They couldn't maintain all the ceremonial washings and activities because they were busy tending to the sheep. Yet no one else from the city came to see the Christ child except these "unclean" shepherds. However, two special people did take note of Him when He was brought into the city. Luke 2:25-26 mentions Simeon, a man who "was righteous and devout, looking for the consolation of Israel; and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ." Luke 2:36-38 tells us about Anna, a widow who saw the Messiah in the Temple, and who "continued to speak of Him to all those who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem" (v. 28).

However, the mass of people in Jerusalem missed Christmas. The birth of Christ took place only a few miles away. It was the fulfillment of all their dreams and hopes--the event that would change the destiny of the world--but they missed it. Why did they miss it? Religion. They were so busy with the rituals of their religion that they missed the reality of His birth.

When Jesus asked His disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" (Matthew 16:13), their answer was: "Some say John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; but still others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets" (v. 14). All the speculations were wrong. Jesus didn't fit into the religious system of His day.

And the people knew He didn't after He gave the Sermon on the Mount.

Religion will damn a soul faster than anything if it is anything less than true worship of the true God. A false religious system gives a person a place to hide--a place where he can mask his spirituality. People steeped in various cults talk about God, Christ, and Scripture, but they don't know Christ. They are lost in the midst of religion. So the people of Jerusalem missed Christmas while they were being religious.

Idolatry

The Romans also missed Christmas. Micah's prophecy that the Christ child would be born in Bethlehem was set in motion by a Gentile emperor. Luke 2:1-2 says, "It came about in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth. This was the first census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria." The Roman soldiers registered the people and took the census.

Throughout the life of Christ we see the presence of the Romans. Before His death Christ appeared before Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea (John 18:28-40). He was executed by the Romans (Matthew 27:27-36). Roman guards lied about His resurrection, propagating a story to cover up the reality that He rose from the dead (Matthew 28:11-15). They all missed Christmas because of their idolatry: they worshiped their own gods. Christ didn't fit in with them. They worshiped a multitude of gods, and the pinnacle of their worship was emperor worship. So in the midst of their pagan idolatry they missed Christmas.

The world today is full of people who worship their own gods. They don't worship idols like they did at the time of Christ, but we still have idols and gods. Some people worship money. Some people worship sex. Others worship cars, boats, and houses. Some worship power and prestige. Those things are the pagan gods of today--the idols of the twenty-first century. And if that is what you're worshipping, you'll miss Christmas, too. You may receive some presents, eat a big dinner, and enjoy a beautifully decorated pine tree, but you'll miss Christmas.

Over-Familiarity

Perhaps the saddest of all, the people of Nazareth missed Christmas. Luke 2:39-40 says, "When they had performed everything according to the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own city of Nazareth. And the Child continued to grow and became strong, increasing in wisdom; and the grace of God was upon Him." When Jesus returned to Nazareth, He was unlike any other child in Nazareth. He accompanied His parents to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover when He was twelve years old. He proceeded to confound the doctors of theology in the Temple (Luke 2:41-47). He spent thirty years of His life in Nazareth, yet the residents failed to recognize Him.

Luke 4 unveils the tragedy that took place when Jesus revealed His identity to the Nazarenes:

He came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up; and as was His custom, He entered the synagogue on the Sabbath, and stood up to read. And the book of the prophet Isaiah was handed to Him. And He opened the book, and found the place where it was written, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are downtrodden, to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord." And He closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant, and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed upon Him. And He began to say to them, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." And all were speaking well of Him, and wondering at the gracious words which were falling from His lips; and they were saying, "Is this not Joseph's son?" ... And He said, "Truly I say to you, no prophet is welcome in his home town" (vv. 16-22, 24).

The people of Nazareth missed Christmas because of over-familiarity. They knew Jesus as Joseph's son, and they didn't view that as anything special. After Jesus finished speaking in the synagogue, the people "rose up and cast Him out of the city, and led Him to the brow of the hill on which their city had been built, in order to throw Him down the cliff. But passing through their midst, He went His way" (vv. 29-30).

Over-familiarity is a deadly thing. I come across so many people who say they were raised in a Christian environment but are not Christians. Fear grips my heart when I hear that. Over-familiarity strangles conviction. When you've heard something so many times without doing anything about it, such familiarity can breed contempt.

Mark 6:6 gives us Christ's own analysis of the people of Nazareth: "He wondered at their unbelief." Matthew 13:58 adds, "He did not do many miracles there because of their unbelief." Over-familiarity with Christmas truth can breed a stony heart. You had better respond while your heart is soft, or your heart will become hard and you won't have the opportunity to respond (Proverbs 29:1).

Conclusion

There are many ways to miss Christmas: ignorant preoccupation, ritual, idolatry, and over-familiarity. But behind all those reasons is unbelief. Many people simply refuse to believe in Jesus Christ. The apostle John said, "He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name" (John 1:10-12).

If you've been missing the reality of Christmas in your life, know that if you receive the Lord Jesus Christ and believe in His name, Christmas will become real to you. It can happen today; and it's

between you and God (2 Corinthians 6:1-2; Romans 10:8-11).

Adapted from John MacArthur, "Six Ways Satan is Stealing Christmas."

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