

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

## **The People Who Missed Christmas: Rome and Nazareth**

Scripture: Luke 2:1; Luke 4:16–30

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An entire nation missed Christmas. All of Rome could have shared in the Savior's birth, but they missed it. That first Christmas was set in a Roman scene. Herod, for example, was the ruler appointed by Rome. And it was a decree by Caesar Augustus that set everything in motion (Luke 2:1).

Who was Caesar Augustus? He's mentioned only once in Scripture, but he occupies an important place in the history of the Roman Empire. He was the grand-nephew of Julius Caesar. His name was Octavian; "Augustus" was a title meaning "venerable." He ruled Rome from 27 B.C. to A.D. 14.

Octavian was for the most part a benevolent ruler. He was responsible for the *Pax Romana*, the era of peace between all the different parts of the Roman Empire. He instituted numerous reforms designed to do away with the worst forms of corruption and keep peace throughout the empire. But Octavian took the title of Pontifex Maximus, which means "highest priest." He also deified both Julius Caesar and himself, and had temples built for Caesar worship.

Octavian had come to power when Julius Caesar was assassinated. In his will, Julius Caesar left all his possessions, including the throne, to his grand-nephew. In the middle of his reign, Octavian ordered a worldwide census. That was the decree spoken of in Luke 2:1.

And so Jesus was born in the heyday of the Roman Empire. Yet nearly all of Rome missed Christmas. Roman soldiers must have been everywhere in Bethlehem and the surrounding area, overseeing the census, registering people, and keeping order. Yet they missed Jesus' birth. Why? Idolatry. They had their own gods—they were even willing to let their emperor pretend to be God. Christ did not fit into their pantheon. No mythological god could coexist with Him. So the Romans totally ignored His birth. This newborn baby became just one more number in their census.

Paganism has a strong grip on our world today, and millions miss Christmas because of it. I'm not talking only about the dark paganism of distant lands, where Christ is unknown and unheard of, and where Christmas is unheard of. Obviously, those people miss Christmas. But there is another, subtler form of idolatry even in our society. And millions miss Christmas because of it. Most people in North America don't worship carved idols or follow demonic superstition like the Romans did, but they nevertheless worship false gods. Some people worship money. Others worship sex. I know people who worship cars, boats, houses, power, prestige, popularity, and fame. Those things represent the pagan gods of the 21st century: selfishness and materialism. If that is what you worship, you'll miss Christmas.

Finally, and perhaps saddest of all, Nazareth missed Christmas. Nazareth was a crude, uncultured town, quite a distance from Bethlehem. The people of that region had a reputation for violence.

Nathanael expressed the prevailing opinion of that little town: “Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?” (John 1:46).

Yet Nazareth was the home of Mary and Joseph, and the boyhood home of Jesus. Although he was born in Bethlehem, He grew up in Nazareth and lived His perfect life before all the people there. Yet they completely overlooked Him. Luke 4 describes the most important Sabbath day Nazareth ever had:

And He [Jesus] 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 oppressed, to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord.” And He closed the book, gave it back to the attendant and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on Him. And He began to say to them, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” (Luke 4:16-21)

After years of living among those people, Jesus was revealing to the Nazarenes who He was. For the first time ever, He was telling them publicly that He was the Messiah. And what was their reaction?

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 to them, “No doubt you will quote this proverb to Me, ‘Physician, heal yourself! Whatever we heard was done at Capernaum, do here in your hometown as well.’” And He said, “Truly I say to you, no prophet is welcome in his hometown. But I say to you in truth, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the sky was shut up for three years and six months, when a great famine came over all the land; and yet Elijah was sent to none of them, but only to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet; and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian.” And all the people in the synagogue were filled with rage as they heard these things; and they got up and drove 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. (Luke 4:22-30)

The people who knew Jesus best—those with whom He had grown up and among whom He had lived—tried to kill Him! That’s what I call missing Christmas. “He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him,” John 1:11 says. The people of Nazareth, who knew Him better than anyone, had no idea who He really was. Mark 6:6 says even Jesus wondered at their unbelief.

What was their problem? Familiarity. They knew Him too well. They knew Him so well they couldn’t believe He was anyone special. Familiarity mixed with unbelief is a deadly thing. Whenever people tell me they grew up in Christianity but have rejected it, I cringe. Familiarity strangles conviction. Perhaps the most tragic sin of all is the unbelief of a person who has heard all the sermons, sat through all the Bible lessons, knows all the Christmas stories, but rejects Christ. There is no gospel, no good news, for such a person, because he already knows and rejects the only truth that can set him free. What a sad way to miss Christmas!

No one has to miss Christmas. Ignorant preoccupation, jealous fear, prideful indifference, religious

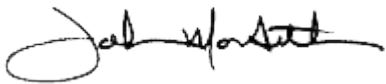
ritual, false gods, and even contemptuous familiarity are only expressions of the one real reason people miss Christmas: unbelief.

If you truly love the Lord, you cannot allow those expressions of unbelief to take root in your heart. Don't waste another year letting worldly materialism and selfish pursuits steal your affection. Discipline your heart and train your focus on the sacrifice Christ made on your behalf. Don't lose sight of what and Whom you're celebrating in the days ahead.

On the other hand, perhaps you've been missing Christmas *altogether*. You may get presents and eat a big dinner and decorate a tree, but you know in your heart that you are no different from the innkeeper, Herod, the religious leaders, the people of Jerusalem, the Romans, or the citizens of Nazareth. You are missing the reality of Christmas.

You don't have to miss another one. Turn from your sin and unbelief and receive Christ as Lord and God. He will forgive your sin, change your life, and give you the greatest Christmas gift anyone can receive: "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 1:11-12).

Don't miss Christmas this year!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John MacArthur". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and a long, sweeping underline.

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

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