

WHAT IS CHRISTMAS?

A couple of years ago on America's Funniest Home Videos, a young boy was shown on Christmas morning. He came down to see a large present beside the tree and ran over to tear it open to see what was inside. The paper went flying and suddenly he broke into a dance and jumped around the room saying, "Wow it's just what I wanted. Wow, it's just what I needed. Wow..." Then after looking at it again he says with a puzzled look on his face, "What is it?"

On that first Christmas the angels announced the birth of a new child. The heavens were opened and all the company of heaven broke into praise. Shepherds and wise men went racing to Bethlehem to see what it was all about. And for two thousand years we have been jumping up and down saying, "Wow, it's just what I wanted and exactly what I needed!" But in the next breath we look again inside the stable and ask, "What is it?" Why did God become a man? What is Christmas all about?

It is amazing to me that an event that happened on the other side of the world nearly 2000 years ago can still cause traffic jams today. That is the power of God. What is so special about Christmas? It is the hinge of history. Even our calendars are dated as either A.D. or B.C. using the reference point of the birth of Jesus Christ. God split history with the event of that first Christmas.

So, what is so special about Christmas? I think Philippians 2 answers it best. We have here one of the greatest explanations in the Bible of who Jesus Christ is and what He came to do. This is our bedrock, the foundation of everything that we believe:

Phil 2:5 Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: 6 Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, 7 but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. 8 And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death -- even death on a cross! 9 Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, 10 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

1. The REALITY of Christmas – the cradle (vs. 5-7)

Our attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Even though he was in very nature God, He did not consider equality with God something to be GRASPED. What does that mean?

The word GRASPED is the Greek word HARPAGMOS and comes from the root word which means to choose. Jesus had a choice. He could have held on to and retained His divine nature. However, He chose to release it and to become human for us. He chose to become a servant. The reality of Christmas is that God chose to become one of us.

The greatest news of all time is that God chose to become one of us to save us from our sins. Many here have been waiting a long time for Christmas. In the last verses of the Old Testament, Malachi had promised that the Messiah would come and that a prophet like Elijah would announce His coming. For 400 years God had been silent. During that time kingdoms had risen and fell.

Imagine picking up a newspaper from 1622. First of all, it would be almost impossible to find a newspaper since the printing press was still a relatively new invention.

The first colony in Jamestown Virginia had been established in 1607 and the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock only 2 years before. The first King James Bible was printed only 11 years before. The world was a very different place then. 400 years is a LONG time. It was worth the wait.

When the allies landed on Normandy on D-Day, that was big news. It was a clear victory and a sign that the war would be won. That is nothing compared to the news that God invaded earth.

When President Nixon was the president of the United States, he said in a speech that the greatest moment in human history was when man walked on the moon. But Billy Graham corrected him and said, "no, the greatest moment in history was not when man walked on the moon but when God walked on the earth." Jesus was God in the flesh and he walked among us.

Larry King was once asked in an interview a particular question: "If you could select any one person across all of history to interview, who would it be?" Mr. King's answer was that he would like to interview Jesus Christ. When the questioner followed with, "And what would you like to ask him?" King replied, "I would like to ask him if he was indeed virgin-born. The answer to that question would define history for me."

The greatest news of all time is that God came in the flesh. Jesus was eternally, and equally God. He was infinite creator but laid aside his divinity to become a finite creation.

There are a lot of people in the world today who have a hard time with that. They cannot understand why and how God would become a man and so they reject Him. They accept Jesus as a great man, even a great prophet. There's only one problem with that: Jesus never claimed to be a great prophet. Over and over the Bible repeats and Jesus proclaims that He is God.

On December 17, 1903, Orville and Wilbur Wright made their first flight of an airplane at Kitty Hawk NC. The flight lasted 59 seconds and travelled 850 ft. Wilbur rushed to the local telegraph office and sent the following message home – WE HAVE FLOWN FOR 59 SECONDS - WE WILL BE HOME FOR CHRISTMAS! Upon receiving the telegram their sister, Katherine went to the newspaper office, told the editor of her brother's new flying machine, and informed him that they would be home for Christmas, if he would like to set up an interview. He told her that was nice, and he would be sure to put something in the paper regarding the boys. On December 19th, the local paper placed the following headline on the 6th page of the paper: "WRIGHT BROTHERS HOME FOR CHRISTMAS" The most important story of the year – man's first flight – and the editor missed it!

The story of Christmas does not start 2000 years ago in Bethlehem but in eternity past when our creator God decided He would give himself to save His creation. The cradle reminds us of God's choice to come and become part of His creation. This is the reality of Christmas.

2. The REASON for Christmas – the cross (vs. 8)

This passage goes on to say that Jesus being found in appearance as a man, humbled himself and became obedient to death -- even death on a cross! Jesus died a cruel and horrible death for us.

Christmas makes no sense without the cross. Jesus chose to lay aside His divine nature, He also chose to go to the cross and laid down His physical life for us. He didn't have to. He was God. At any moment during his trial and crucifixion He could have called 10,000 angels and stopped the process at any point. He did not have to go to the cross. Nobody put Him there without His permission.

So then why did He allow it to happen? Jesus came to the earth to show us God's love by dying on the cross for us. The manger and the cross show us what God was willing to give for us. They show us how much God truly loves us.

John 3:16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

1 John 4:9 This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.

Rom 5:8 But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Christmas and Easter both remind us of God's great love for us. Jesus not only decided to become a human but also decided to suffer a horrible death for us.

More than a century ago Argentina and Chile were almost at war over a border dispute between the two nations high in the Andes mountains. War was a very real possibility in 1902. Christians around the world urged these nations to settle the matter in a friendly way and without the use of war. The governments of Argentina and Chile listened and agreed to submit the matter to arbitration. When an agreement was reached it was decided that a statue should be placed on the border to remind the people that they should work together for peace. The statue is a 26-foot-high bronze Christ holding his right hand out to bless the two nations and a cross in his left hand. The statue is called 'Christ the Redeemer of the Andes'. The bronze out of which the statue was made came from old canons. A plaque at the base of the statue reads in Spanish "Sooner shall these mountain crags crumble to dust than Chile and Argentina shall go to war again with each other". Jesus stands today between us and Father. Because of the cross we have found peace with God. The reality and reason for Christmas ...

3. The RESULT of Christmas – the crown (vs. 9-11)

Phil 2:9 Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, 10 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

What is the result of Christmas? One day every knee will bow and every tongue will confess what God has made know to all of us, the truth of all truth that Jesus is Lord. It will happen. One day every person on earth will know the truth. All of the arrogance in this world that puts itself up against Christ and all of the denial and pseudo scientific and psychological and philosophical arguments that are put up will fall by the wayside, and every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord.

One day every person that has or will ever live will understand this truth. Every nationality, every age group, every male and female, every religion will say "Jesus is Lord." All of the politicians will be there and say "Jesus is Lord." All of the rock stars will say "Jesus is Lord." All of the scientists, professors, business men, homemakers will say "Jesus is Lord." Everyone.

The issue is not, will you admit that Jesus is Lord? One day everyone will. The issue is simply, when? You will either admit it now in love and honor and respect or you will admit it later and find you have been wrong and made a big mistake. Every knee will bow, every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord. For many this realization will come too late.

For most of here today in this room have already made that declaration. At some point in the past you understood and received Christ. You have already made the declaration the Jesus is Lord. You have recognized the reality and the reason for Christmas. Again, we heard the words of this familiar verse;

John 3:16 For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

Jesus came and died so that we could live. He did it because He loves us and wants a relationship with us. He chose to lay aside his majesty and be born a baby in a manger so that he could also die to give his life for us. He chose to come to us so that we could choose be with Him.

God clothed himself in vile man's flesh so he might be weak enough to suffer. -- John Donne

Jesus chose this because he loved us. It was for the joy that was set before Him that He gave His life for us. Not just so that we might have a future, but that we would have a future with Him. That is what Christmas is about.

I think most of us have seen the Charlie Brown Christmas Special. It first aired back on Dec 9, 1965 (57 years ago!) In it, Charlie Brown is frustrated by all the commercialism that he sees around him and cries out "Isn't there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about!" Then Linus steps up and quotes those powerful and well-known words from Luke 2:8-14.

Back in 1965 TV producer when Lee Mendelson asked Charles Shultz to do a Christmas Special, he agreed but insisted that the program had to be about the true meaning of Christmas. When Mendelson objected to those words from the bible being included in the special, Shultz insisted saying "If we don't do it, who will?" The special won a number of awards and it has been on TV every year since then. The scene with Linus reading from the Book of Luke about the meaning of the season has become what many critics say are "the most magical and meaningful two minutes in all of TV animation."

The cradle reminds us of the reality for Christmas. The cross reminds us of the reason for Christmas and the crown reminds us of the result of Christmas. God has made a way to redeem us. He has atoned for our sins and is inviting us into a relationship with Him. The gift that Jesus offers us this Christmas is the gift of himself. It s the gift of relationship.

One of the ancient kings of Persia named Shah Abbas loved to mingle with his people in disguise. Once, dressed as a poor man, he descended the long flight of stairs, dark and damp to the tiny cellar where the fireman, seated on ashes, was tending the furnace. The king sat down beside him and began to talk. At meal time the fireman produced some coarse black bread and a jug of water and they ate and drank. The king went away but returned again and again for his heart was filled with sympathy for the lonely man. They became very good friends as time passed. At last the king thought, "I'll tell him who I am, and see what gift he will ask." So he did, but the fireman didn't ask for a thing. The king was astonished and said, "Don't you realize that I can give you anything—a city, a throne?" The man gently replied, "I understand your Majesty. You have already given me the greatest gift a man could receive. You left your elegant surroundings to sit with me here in this dark and lonely place. You could give nothing more precious. You have given me yourself and that is far more than I could ever deserve. My only request would be that you never withdraw this gift of your friendship."

The gift that Jesus offers us is not just salvation but friendship. What a joy it is to have a personal relationship with Jesus. God showed our value as humans when He chose to come and become one of us. He showed our value and His love by dying for us. Most importantly, He shows us our worth by inviting us to live with him forever, not simply as our Lord but also as our friend.

Christmas is time for giving. What do you give the person who has everything? There are three things that God does not have until we give them to him; our time, treasure and talents. Make sure to set aside time this Christmas to ponder again the miracle.