

Christmas

Christmas is far and away the most celebrated holiday in the world. Despite its popularity, it's celebrated quite differently, from household to household, and country to country; many emphasizing the birth of Jesus, and others focused solely on Santa Claus. Some claim Christmas is a pagan holiday that shouldn't be recognized at all. This essay aims to take a deeper look into the realities of Christmas through the Bible, as well as give suggestions on how to approach the secular traditions of Christmas.

Christmas is the celebration of Christ's birth, or Christ's advent: coming. The greatest details of the birth of Jesus are found in the gospels of Matthew and Luke. Providing a broad scope, both gospels detail the genealogy of Jesus; Matthew's gospel provides the genealogy in descending order, oldest to newest, per Jewish tradition. Luke's gospel provides Jesus' genealogy in ascending order, recent to oldest, per Greco-Roman tradition. Both genealogies are the same from Abraham to David, but then they split; Matthew's providing the paternal records through Solomon, while Luke's shifts to the maternal records, through Nathan, Solomon's brother. It's interesting to note that Jews historically don't include women in genealogies, yet Matthew's account lists five women. Amidst the prestigious list of men, five women of less than reputable backgrounds appear. Tamar, who faked being a prostitute, slept with her father-in-law, and they begat Perez. Rahab, a Gentile of Jericho, who actually was a prostitute. She came to faith in God, then married Salmon, a Jew, and they begat Boaz. Ruth, another Gentile, a peasant, a nomad. She also comes to faith in God, marries Boaz, and they bore Obed, the grandfather of King David. Bathsheba, an adulteress with King David; although seduced by David's power, she was complicit. David has her husband killed while meanwhile she and David bore a son, who later died as a baby. She and King David eventually marry, and they begat Solomon. Mary, a peasant, having no nobility or social stature; socially insignificant. What she did have though, was faith! She wasn't sinless, but she displayed exceptional trust in God. The Holy Spirit conceives the baby Jesus in her. Mary later marries a man named Joseph. These five women, mostly poor, otherwise unimportant, misfits, some notoriously sinful, some not even Jewish in ethnicity, unlikely to put a dent in the course of history, yet they not only became significant, but prominent!

What's the point of mentioning them, especially in the genealogy of Jesus? The reason is, Jesus is all about taking ordinary people, even notorious sinners, and making them a significant part of His plan! None of these ladies were used by God because of their qualifications. God doesn't call the qualified, He qualifies those He calls!

After the genealogy, Matthew writes about Jesus' birth. Enter the couple, Joseph and Mary, in the middle of a most unique situation! Mary was betrothed to be married to Joseph. Betrothal was a legally binding relationship, which required death or divorce to end. Families made prenuptial agreements. When one is betrothed, they are considered married; husband and wife, though they have not yet held the wedding and are not yet living together. If one dies who is betrothed, the other is considered a widow/widower. Jewish tradition held that once betrothal is set, the woman remained living in her father's household and began to prepare her trousseau, what we might know as a "hope-chest" which was a trunk holding linens and household goods to prepare herself to be a home-maker. Meanwhile, the groom returned to his father's house and built an apartment on the father's homestead where he and his soon to be bride will reside. When the groom finished building, he'd return with his entourage to the bride's house. He'd do this at an unexpected time, usually late in the night, and his entourage would shout from outside to call her forth. With great excitement, the bride and her attendees would gather up her things, and would go with the groom back to his father's house to be married and have a feast. Jesus speaks of this very tradition when He refers to His second coming, to return for His bride, the Christian Church. Jesus says (in summary), "Behold, I go to My Father's house to prepare a place for you. In My Father's house there are many rooms. When I am done, I will return with a shout and call forth My bride," John 14.

Now, an angel of the Lord, named Gabriel, was sent to tell Mary that ***"you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus."*** ***"Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel answered and said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy Child shall be called the Son of God,"*** Luke 1:31-35. This came to pass, and in the days that followed, eventually Joseph had found Mary to be pregnant. Naturally, Joseph assumed Mary was unfaithful. The Law even stated that adulterers could face execution by stoning. Mary was in a socially terrible position, being that she would have no way to convince people that she wasn't unfaithful to Joseph. The realization of her pregnancy caused Joseph to decide to end the betrothal. Matthew 1:19 says, ***"And Joseph her husband, being a righteous man and not wanting to disgrace her, planned to send her away secretly."*** He's here called "husband," because that was the legal term due to their betrothal, though they hadn't yet wed. Joseph was an upright man according to the Law, but was greater in his compassion and mercy, trying to part from her with as little damage as possible. He planned to divorce her without mentioning the pregnancy, hence divorcing her "secretly." Afterall, divorce had sadly become so commonplace amongst the Jews, that even Jesus later addressed it. Seeing Joseph's intentions to divorce, the Lord intervenes. Matthew 1:20-21, ***"But when he (Joseph) had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins."*** God intervened. In fact, God intervening is what Christmas is all about; Jesus intervening into humanity.

This all goes to show that God's not distant from our problems. He saw Joseph's distress. The Lord engages our greatest troubles most intimately. In fact, so intimately, that He became one of us.

Now, during this time, a census was called, and being betrothed, Joseph and Mary were required to register as a couple. The timing was in some ways ideal, as it allowed Mary to leave her hometown before her pregnancy was too difficult to keep concealed; as neighbors wouldn't have been kind to her. This census took them ***"to the city of David which is called Bethlehem,"*** Luke 2:4. ***"While they were there, the days were completed for her to give birth. And she 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,"*** Luke 2:6-7.

Jesus was here! Born exactly as the Old Testament prophets had specified. But, why did Jesus need to come at all? Why did God Himself need to become one of us? Why couldn't God just use a prominent figure to accomplish the things that Jesus accomplished? Why not use a Moses, an Abraham, a Paul, etc., to be the Savior? Why not send a prominent angel, like Gabriel, to be a Savior figure? What required God to become a man?

Consider the following. God creates man. Man rejects God and disobeys Him. God calls this choice, sin, and the consequence of sin is physical death and eternal separation from God in a place called hell. Because God is just, He must dispense His wrath upon those that reject Him. This wrath would be so great, no human could endure it. Man is doomed by this reality. However, God creates the solution for man's dilemma, and God Himself is the answer. God chooses to become a man and take the full weight of this wrath upon Himself, so that man doesn't have to. That's how amazing God's grace is! God, specifically the second person of the trinity, came to earth, and became a human. He was given the name Jesus, lived a sinless life, and took the just wrath of the Father and put it on Himself. He bore the sin of all mankind. No angel could do this. No Abrahamic figure could do this. God came to do what only God can do. This was His choice; the ultimate demonstration of love. This was, "good news of great joy," indeed! Christmas should make the world merry; the cause for a weary world to rejoice! Luke 2:9-14, ***"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." And suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased."***

1 Timothy 1:15, ***“It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.”*** God couldn’t appoint another to come and die, that’s a copout. Besides, no other being could be worthy. Jesus came to do what only God could do.

Pastor John Piper wrote the following of Jesus’ incarnation: becoming flesh, a man. Piper writes, *“Jesus was the Heavenly Child of an earthly mother, and the earthly child of a Heavenly Father! In eternity, He had a Father, but no mother; in time, He had a mother, but no father! He made His own mother! He was older than His own mother, and exactly as old as His Father. He was co-eternal, co-essential, co-existent, and co-equal with His Father—but now He is also human! “Veiled in flesh the Godhead see, Hail His incarnate Deity.” No wonder the “herald angels” sang!”*

Now, after angels had alerted the shepherds to come and worship the newborn Jesus, the Heavenly Father continued leading sinners to Jesus. In this case, it happened to be a peculiar group, magi (where we get the word magician); a priestly group from the east, Persia, who made a living from sinful practices. They were practitioners of religious magic; soothsaying, fortune-telling, and incantations. They were also astrologers, which is the false practice of reading the stars to discern divine counsel. All of these practices are forbidden in both the Old and New Testaments. Yet, these philosophers/astrologers, in their search for wisdom, have come to believe the prophecies of the Messiah and have searched Him out. What’s amazing, is that God used astrology to lead astrologers to Himself! He redeemed this practice, and created a star to guide them to Jesus. Talk about redeeming an act for His own glory! ***“The star, which they had seen in the east, went on before them until it came and stood over the place where the Child was,”*** Matthew 2:9. This wasn’t the first time the Lord has taken an act that was sinful to man, and redeemed it for His glory. God had commanded Hosea marry a lady named Gomer, a known prostitute, to show Israel their adultery with other deities. God directed Isaiah live totally naked for 3 years, to show Egypt & Cush their shame. In all these circumstances, God is pursuing man, showing men that they need to get right with God. We don’t seek the Lord on our own, He calls us to Himself!

Jesus is God’s way to call sinners to Himself.

Jesus came to save sinners as only He could.

Jesus wants you to be a significant part in His plan to reach the world.

I wonder if Joseph thought, *“What can I do for God, I’m just a carpenter?”* Perhaps Mary thought, *“What can I do for God, I’m just a simple nobody?”* Perhaps Rahab thought, *“What use am I to God, I’ve been a prostitute?”* Perhaps David thought, *“What can God do with me, I’m an adulterer and a murderer!”* You might be thinking, *“What can Jesus use me for? I’ve been a skeptic, a drunk, a cheater. I’m no scholar. I’m no pastor.”* The Apostle Paul says (1 Timothy 1:15-16), ***“Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all. Yet for this reason I found mercy.”*** Like Paul, we all may feel that we’re the worst of sinners and therefore disqualified. Yet Jesus has counted us worthy to be His witness. Christmas is a time to remind of that Jesus is Lord, that sin can be forgiven, that our value and worth is what God says it is! These truths are reason to be merry!

Fast forward, Joseph and Mary take the baby Jesus to the temple to be presented to the Lord, as was the requirement. The Law stated that among the Jews, every firstborn male must be dedicated to the Lord. This ceremony took place in the temple by one of the priests, and was done 40 days after birth. Additionally, a sacrifice was given as part of the ceremony; two turtledoves. At the temple, the couple were met by a man named Simeon. Simeon was a special man, ***“this man was righteous and devout, looking for the consolation of Israel,”*** Luke 2:25. The ***“consolation of Israel”***, means the One would come and console, or comfort, the nation of Israel. Furthermore, ***“it had been revealed to Simeon by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ. Led by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in Jesus to carry out for Him the custom of the Law, Simeon took Him into his arms, and blessed God, and said, “Now Lord, You are releasing Your bond-servant to depart in peace, according to Your word; for my eyes have seen Your salvation,”*** Luke 2:26-30. Simeon believed God’s Word. Simeon lived with anticipation of God’s promise. Simeon entrusted himself to God because God is faithful to do what He says.

Christmas is rightly shrouded with singing, being merry, rejoicing, and gift giving. These are appropriate. Just as appropriate though, is the understanding that Christmas is about blood, about sacrifice. The significance of Christ's birth cannot be fully understood unless we grasp that God becoming a man, to die for sinners, is part of God's plan for atonement. Atonement means to cover over; meaning to cover over one's sin. Jesus's blood is the atonement for sin. Blood sacrifice is taught from Genesis to Revelation, and Christmas is a part of that.

Blood sacrifice is recognized in every culture, in all times of human history. We admire this type of sacrifice. For example, the soldier that bleeds for his country, or sacrifices himself to save his fellow soldiers. Medals are given to recognize one who dies for another. In the Bible, the first mention of blood sacrifice is in Genesis 3:21 where God chooses to cover Adam and Eve; covering their nakedness by killing an animal and using its skin. The Lord could have used something else; plants, wool, etc. This covering though was unique; showing that when one sins, it requires a covering that involves the death of another.

Throughout the Old Testament we see blood sacrifice as a way to appease the Lord. However, these sacrifices would only serve to hold off God's just wrath for a time. These were insufficient to appease for the sin of the world. How could the blood of an animal, or even the blood of a sinful man, appease the wrath of God? Even if one were to be so noble as to offer himself as a sacrifice for those that he loved, that offering would be a tainted offering; dirty, impure, unworthy.

God kept the matter of blood sacrifice ever-present before His people, so that they would have a glimpse of understanding the depth of their sin, and that they'd continue to understand their need for a Savior. For these reasons, God instituted the Law, through Moses, which called sacrifices year-round, and specifically for two dominant sacrifices; Passover and the Day of Atonement. Passover was an annual practice to identify with the first Passover that took place in Egypt, recorded in Exodus 12. In short, this was when the people of God were delivered from slavery, and the last of the ten plagues that served to free them was the death of the firstborn in every household in Egypt. However, the Spirit of God would "pass over" any house that had the blood of a lamb covering its doorposts. Aside from Passover, the Day of Atonement was instituted. On this day, a single goat was selected to be sacrificed. In doing so, this goat bore the sin of the nation of Israel from the previous year. Another goat would need to be sacrificed again next year. These major annual sacrifices ultimately fell short, being insufficient blood sacrifices. They only provided temporary appeasement.

What sacrifice could be made that would appease God's wrath? Only a perfect sacrifice; sinless, pure, undefiled. Only God becoming a man can fit this description. Only the blood of Jesus could be worthy to atone for the sin of a wicked world. Christ's sacrifice, the ultimate Passover, means that death and destruction pass over His blood-bought people, His bride, the Christian body of believers that have entrusted themselves to Jesus. The blood of Christ, the cross of Christ, the atonement of Christ, and the death of Christ are all referring to the same thing; that is, Christ's sacrifice on our behalf.

Christmas is about God becoming a man, to offer Himself as a sacrifice, so that those who entrust themselves to Him may live. I'm humbled by this reality. Thank you, Jesus! You love me that much! I love you too!

So, Christmas is a spiritual time. It's a humbling time. It's a time for celebration and rejoicing. It's many things. So, what's a Christian to do with the traditions of the world that can tend to overwhelm the Christmas season? For example, what am I to do with Santa Claus? Growing up, my family incorporated Santa Claus into Christmas, as was a part of our American culture. In raising my kids, I did the same. However, Jesus was never overshadowed by Santa. As a kid, we'd read the Christmas story on Christmas morning, attend Christmas Eve services, and images of the baby Jesus (the Nativity scene) and angels were adorned throughout the house. We knew full well what Christmas was about. Enjoying things like watching a Charlie Brown Christmas, Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer, and other Christmas specials were also a fun part of Christmas for me. The bottom line, worldly traditions can be enjoyed but need to be balanced.

While having fun with the myth of Santa, remind yourself and your kids of the following truths. Santa offers only earthly things; nothing lasting, nothing eternal. Jesus offers not only earthly joy, but eternal life! Santa offers short-lived gifts, on the condition of good works; whether you've been naughty or nice. Jesus offers his eternal gifts of forgiveness and life, freely, by grace through faith, and not at all based on our works! Santa is pretend. Jesus is absolutely real! Santa only shows up once a year. Jesus promises to be with His followers always (Matthew 28:20)! Santa can't solve our worst problem, which is sin and death. Jesus did solve our worst problem; saving those who believe, from hell and giving them an abundant life here on earth! Santa is not relevant in many cultures, and totally unknown in some places of the world. Jesus is the King of kings and Lord of lords and all the peoples of the world can know Him! Santa will be forgotten someday. Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever (Hebrews 13:8)!

This Christmas, celebrate Jesus like never before! As best as you can, let your decorations point to Jesus. Let your food point to Jesus. Let your games point to Jesus. Let your singing point to Jesus. Choose to out-rejoice the world. Choose to out-give the world. Choose to out-decorate the world. Let it all point to Jesus!

Merry Christmas!