

THE WHAT & WHY OF CHRISTMAS

The what and why of Christmas

Taught by Simeon Forder on Sunday morning, 17th December 2023 @ Deal Christian Fellowship

Reading: Luke 2:15-17

Introduction

For those that have been part of this church for a while, you'll know there's a few things we teach about Christmas that are different to what is seen on the TV, but also different to what you'll hear in many churches. And this morning, I intend to note some of those differences again.

But, you may wonder, does it matter? Does it really matter whether the wise men went to the stable, or if there was even a stable to go to? Does it matter whether there was a star over Bethlehem? Or *when* the events surrounding Jesus' birth took place?

Well, let's look at what we read in Exodus, for there is a command that was given to Israel that reads:

Exodus 23:1-2

"You shall not circulate a false report. Do not put your hand with the wicked to be an unrighteous witness. You shall not follow a crowd to do evil; nor shall you testify in a dispute so as to turn aside after many to pervert justice.

And what a couple of verses those are for the days we live in! Especially when we think of social media, and how easily things are shared without ever checking that they are true. So commonly is that done without thinking that people have literally been burned to death in some places in the world, simply because a rumour started and then was shared by one person, to another, to several more, and more, and so on. Whether through social media, WhatsApp, or word of mouth.

And it's all too easy to be guilty of this ourselves, to be guilty of circulating a false report. We say to someone, did you know that... [fill in the blank]. And our source? The internet. A social media post. A blog. A YouTube video. We *must* proceed with caution, because there is no guarantee that what we find, read or watch online is true. There are probably a half-dozen people in this church *this morning* that could put a website online from scratch within *half an hour*. And give us half a day and we could have a web site, email address, social media accounts, and a couple of articles already published. All with *zero* accountability.

But on the other hand, we can't *dismiss* something as false because we found it online, as if *everything* online is lie. Because it isn't. There are many credible, good sources you will find there. For it is just like printed books. There are a lot of good ones. But you can't even guarantee that a printed book for sale in a Christian bookstore is actually Biblical. Crazy, but true.

So herein is our challenge. What is our source of truth? What keeps us anchored in it. Well, Jesus had this to say, when praying for His disciples:

John 17:17

Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth.

So then, we should be set apart by what we believe, and what we hold fast to. And what we believe isn't rooted in what we find on Facebook, TikTok, or the news at 10. It's not based on what we read in the newspapers or magazines. Or even in Christian books. Rather, what we believe must be the Bible, for *that* is *the* truth.

But that being the case, we can't just make *assumptions* about the Bible. If you were to take an exam on Shakespeare's *Romeo & Juliet*, and you hadn't read it — you'd just watched the movie, or listened to a song about it, or heard someone else talk about it, then you wouldn't do very well!

And we can't take that sort of cavalier attitude to the Bible. If we do, we're bound to make mistakes. And if we're passing on what we've learned to others (and we should be), then we're going to be passing on our errors also. Like a game of Chinese whispers (or *telephone*), except with serious consequences.

We should take note of what we read in the book of Revelation:

Revelation 22:18-19

For I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life, from the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book.

While that *may* be speaking of that specific book of the Bible, the seriousness with which God takes the Bible should inform the seriousness with which we take it. Such an attitude was found in the early Christians living in a place called Berea, for we read in Acts 17:

Acts 17:10-11

Then the brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea. When they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews. These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so.

Here, they were so determined to hold fast to God's Word, that they were checking out what the apostle Paul said, against what they found in it. And so we should check out all we hear against what the Bible actually says, including what I say this morning.

Now, this morning, I want to take a few moments to look at that the *Bible* says happened at Christmas. Not what tradition says, or what carols say, or what we find on Christmas cards. Not what we see in nativity plays, or TV dramas. But what our source of truth says.

What happened

| September 29th, not December 25th

First, let's start with the timing of these events. Of course, we're all very used to celebrating Jesus' birth on 25th December each year. And it's only right that we remember what God did, and why. And setting some time each year to focus on that has some real merit. However, as many of you will no doubt be aware, the reason we use this specific date is more to do with pagan traditions, rather than Biblical instruction or description.

So what *does* the Bible tell us? Well, we read in Luke chapter 2:

Luke 2:1-2

And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This census first took place while Quirinius was governing Syria.

And so we see that the Romans called a census, which (as we know from subsequent verses) took place right at the time Jesus was born, and indeed was the reason why Joseph and Mary travelled to Bethlehem in the first place, as that's where Joseph's family had come from. So this gives us some approximate timing.

But furthermore, Luke gives us more detail in the opening chapter in his gospel that helps us determine when Jesus was born — for we read about Mary's cousin, Elizabeth, and her husband Zacharias (who was a priest). And through understanding the time and patterns when he would have been serving in the temple, and the timing of the birth of their son, John the Baptist, we can deduce that Jesus wasn't born in December. In fact, pulling together those things as well as more that I've not noted here, it's reasonable to conclude that Jesus was in fact born on 29th September 2BC (which as it happens, would have coincided with the feast of trumpets that year).

What does that mean? Well, it means Jesus' birth didn't take place in the bleak mid-winter, while frosty wind made moan. And as such, carols such as *see amid the winters snow* are singing about fictional circumstances, not factual ones. Why is this important? Well, there are too many people that think what we believe is made up, for us to actually make stuff up, when there is no need to.

In fact, when we do so, we create other problems — for example; it's not reasonable to think the Romans would have called a census in the middle of winter. And winter timing would also be contrary to the shepherd's practice of bringing the sheep from the fields in October, when the Bible says they were *out* in the field when the angels visited the shepherds.

Yes it's a detail, and not a salvation issue, but we don't want to leave anyone in any doubt that the Bible is a reliable, factual account. That is why the details are important too. We must not take away from the credibility of Bible for the sake of having a wintery nativity scene.

| No donkey (only sheep mentioned)

Now, second, we read in verses 3-6 of Luke chapter 2:

Luke 2:3-6

So all went to be registered, everyone to his own city. Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with child. So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered.

In fact, the only animals mentioned are the singular flock of sheep that the shepherds were keeping watch over (as noted in verse 8 of this chapter) and not only is there no mention of them being taken to see Joseph, Mary and Jesus, but we can absolutely *guarantee* that the shepherds didn't give a lamb to them. We'll see why, soon.

Now, the traditional nativity scene is already losing some characters, right?! But it's not only the animals that we need to take off the list of guest appearances beside the manger, for we read later on in this chapter:

| No angels at the manger

Luke 2:9-14

And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid. Then the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: "Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!"

So first, a single angel announces the good news of Jesus' birth to the shepherds — and what good news it was! Next, we then see a multitude of angels appear, praising God, declaring this great news of peace on earth, and goodwill toward men. But we then read in the very next verse:

Luke 2:15

So it was, when the angels had gone away from them into heaven, that the shepherds said to one another, "Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us."

And so the angels don't pop up beside the manger either, for they had *already* returned to heaven. Hopefully you're starting to see the number of wrong assumptions that have been made over the years, about what actually took place. And the nativity scene is starting to look a little different to what we have engrained in our minds. But at least we've got our facts straight about the inn keeper and the stable, right? Well... let's look back at verse 6 of Luke chapter 2:

No stable, but a tower instead

Luke 2:6-7

So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

I can't help but chuckle at how the Bible puts this — that it was Mary that was the one to be delivered. And dads and mums, you'll know this, right... how a pregnant woman goes very quickly in those last couple of weeks from "ah, my baby bump" to "get this baby out of me!". That makes this statement come alive for me, that Mary was delivered! But I digress.

What we *don't* read here is anything about an inn keeper, or indeed a stable, cave or an Airbnb. Merely that there was no room at the inn, and therefore they had to find somewhere else.

So where then, did they go? Well, we're not told here, nor were the *shepherds* told any more detail by the angels in verse 12, which says:

Luke 2:12

And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger."

That's all the angels gave them to go on, yet we read a few verses later:

Luke 2:15-16

So it was, when the angels had gone away from them into heaven, that the shepherds said to one another, "Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us." And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger.

It's as if the shepherds knew exactly where to go. And when digging into this, we find that was actually the case. For, in the book of Micah (which prophecies Jesus' birth), we read:

Micah 4:8

And you, O tower of the flock, The stronghold of the daughter of Zion, To you shall it come, Even the former dominion shall come, The kingdom of the daughter of Jerusalem."

This tower that Micah talks about, was one called *Migdal Eder*, a name that means *watchtower of the flock*. A type of tower that is spoken of in Judges, 2-Kings and Nehemiah. But this specific one, in Bethlehem, was of special note, for not only was this where Jacob's wife Rachel had been buried, but it was here that lambs were purposefully raised for offering as a sacrifice in Jerusalem. So the shepherds would have known of it, as did others of that day. And it's purpose is eye-opening, when we consider that Jesus was the Lamb who was sacrificed in Jerusalem for *our* sin!

But of course, this means the traditional nativity scene is getting quite messed up now. But there's more to come, for there are some individuals we've not yet talked about, which are the wise men.

| Wise men (Magi, many, later, and to Nazareth)

We read in Matthew chapter 2:

Matthew 2:1-2

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him."

So, first, we should note that these were not kings, ruling out the carol titled *We three kings*. But, rather, they were Magi — the king-*makers* of the day. And there is good reason to believe that the specific ones we read of in Matthew chapter 2 had long been anticipating Jesus birth as a result of Daniel's influence and even leadership over the Magi of Babylon hundreds of years before.

And second, there weren't just 3 of them. We get this idea of 3 wise men, no doubt, from making an assumption that there were 3 gifts, so there must be three gift givers — but if I told you that I got socks, chocolate and money for my birthday, that would give you zero clue as to how many people gave me gifts, right? But furthermore, we read in Luke 2:3, that following their arrival, both Herod and all Jerusalem were troubled. Not only at their purpose for coming, but the number of them that had arrived — with reason to believe up to 1000 people were in their entourage.

But a more significant distortion of what the Bible says is the *timing* of their arrival, for in nativity plays, children's books, Christmas carols, Christmas cards, and even sermons, the wise men are pictured or described as arriving soon after the shepherds. But that cannot be the case, for we read in Luke's gospel that 41 days after Jesus' birth, Joseph and Mary presented Him to the Lord at Jerusalem, making an offering of turtledoves or two young pigeons, according to the law of the Lord, given to Moses.

That is confirmed again in Luke 2:39, where we read:

Luke 2:39

So when they had performed all things according to the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own city, Nazareth.

There is no doubt then, that Joseph and Mary were obedient in this regard. However, if the Magi (the wise men) had given their expensive gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh *prior* to them going to the temple, then they *would* have been able to offer a lamb instead. The fact that they did not, confirms either that that they were not in a position to afford a lamb, or they were, but disobeyed God. But given that we clearly read they *did* perform all things according to the law, we have our answer — that they were not rich, and thus had not yet received these gifts from the wise men, nor had they received a lamb as a gift from the shepherds.

In fact, we never read that the wise men went to Bethlehem at all. What we do read is this, again, in Matthew chapter 2:

Matthew 2:1-2

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him."

So, having seen the star in the East, the Magi now arrive in Jerusalem, and ask Herod where Jesus is. This causes Herod some panic, given that he was the one in charge, and wanted it to stay that way! And when he asks the chief priests and scribes where the Messiah would be born, they give him the right answer, quoting Micah chapter 5. After which we read:

Matthew 2:7-11

Then Herod, when he had secretly called the wise men, determined from them what time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the young Child, and when you have found Him, bring back word to me, that I may come and worship Him also." When they heard the king, they departed; and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy. And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

So we read Herod sent them to Bethlehem. But what we don't read is that they went there. But rather, we see that they followed the star — not to a stable and a baby, but to a house and young child. Where was that house? In Nazareth, where Joseph and Mary had returned after going to the temple, as recorded in Luke 2:39. And so we can remove the star from above the manger as well.

Back in Jerusalem, Herod realises that the Magi were not coming back to tell him where Jesus was, and he's mad about it. We read in Matthew 2:16

Matthew 2:16

Then Herod, when he saw that he was deceived by the wise men, was exceedingly angry; and he sent forth and put to death all the male children who were in Bethlehem and in all its districts, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had determined from the wise men.

That is, Herod, knowing it was up to 2 years since the Magi first saw the star, which appeared when Jesus was born, now commits the wicked act of killing all the boys under 2 years old — not only in Bethlehem, but it's surrounding districts too, not knowing that God had both warned the wise men to return home without seeing Herod again, but also warning Joseph in a dream to flee the country, from the house in Nazareth, because of the horror Herod was about to commit. And thus we see that Jesus could have been up to 2 years old when the Magi visited.

What have we just learned?

So then, there are quite a few differences between what we see on Christmas cards, or in nativity plays, or TV dramas, and what *actually* happened at the time of Jesus' birth.

Traditional vs Biblical Christmas events

- Jesus birth was likely September 29th, and not December 25th
- There was no donkey that Mary rode
- There were no animals mentioned near the manger
- Neither were there angels at the manger
- The manger was in a watchtower, not a stable
- The shepherds didn't give a lamb
- The wise men were not kings, and were more than 3 in number
- The star settled over the house, not where Jesus was born
- The wise men arrived up to 2 years after Jesus was born
- The wise men went to Nazareth, and not Bethlehem

That's a lot of wrong assumptions, a lot of error, a lot of false reports that have been so widely circulated that most people believe the traditional story of Christmas is actually what happened.

But worryingly, there is one more wrong assumption that is made about Christmas, that has far bigger consequences than any of those things we've looked at already this morning. And that is many people, perhaps even most people, have made the wrong assumption about *why* Jesus came to earth. So why did He?

Why it happened

Ask most people, and they'll tell you that Jesus was a good man. A good moral teacher. A good example to us all. And they'd be right. But Jesus didn't come to merely set a good example, but to save us. That is, we had a massive problem that we had no solution for.

You see, at the beginning, God gave mankind free choice. But with that free choice, we chose to sin, offending God, and others in the process. And so God gave Moses the 10 Commandments, not to solve that problem, but to expose it. As I've said before, if you're in need of a wash, and you don't realise it, the best way to understand how dirty you are is to look in a mirror, for then you see yourself as others do. And the law helps us see ourselves as God sees us.

For when we lie just once, that makes us a liar. When we steal just once, that makes us a thief. And when we look with lust, Jesus said that makes us an adulterer at heart. Of course, the commandments go on, showing us how we've failed to honour our parents, how we've coveted the things our neighbours have, and how when we look at someone with hate without cause, we've committed murder in our heart. So the law tells us how messed up we are. And the problem is, the law doesn't help us, it just leaves us helpless. Just like a mirror doesn't wash you, it only reveals how dirty you are — how in need you are.

So what's our hope? Well, many like to suggest that it is doing good things. Being nice. Helping old ladies across the street. Checking on your neighbour, and so on. But that's not how it works. If we've been rolling round in the mud, going for a walk somewhere less muddy will not remove the mud from our faces. And likewise, in a far more serious sense, our good works will never justify us in a court of law. For example, pleading with a judge to let us off murder because we do our neighbours shopping for them, will never result in the charges against us dropped — unless of course the judge is corrupt.

When it comes to our sin — that is, all the wrong we have done against God and others — God is a good and holy judge, who cannot be bribed or corrupted. And He will see that justice is done. And the overwhelming problem for us is that we have no defence. We have nothing that will justify our sin. But — and this is the very best news you will ever hear — God loves you. That doesn't mean He can just let you off, because that would mean He isn't just. But He loves you so much that He sent his own Son, Jesus, into this world as a baby, to live as a perfect man, so that with no sin of His own to pay for, He could pay for yours in your place on the cross.

That's *why* all this that I've been talking about this morning happened. That is, Christmas was necessary because of our sin.

So then, what are you going to do about it?

What are you going to do about it?

I ask this, because it's no good just believing Jesus is God, or even that He rose again. That's merely accepting the facts of the situation. The decision you have to make is whether to accept or reject His free offer of salvation for you. You can walk away this morning, rejecting this offer, but that will ultimately mean you have no defence when you stand in front of God on Judgement Day, and He will see justice is done, and throw you into hell. Or, you can put your faith and trust in Jesus to save you, not through any good works you've done, but through the good work He has already done by dying in your place on the cross.

This question is the most important one you will ever answer in your life. This decision has the biggest consequence for the rest of your life — eternity included. So what are you going to do about it? What are you going to do about the very reason God sent Jesus to earth as a baby?

Let me come back to one thought. There's many things about the Christmas story that people are mistaken about because they have failed to check out what the Bible actually says. They've made assumptions, and they are wrong ones. But the worst assumption of all to make, is that Jesus was merely a good man, or a good example. Let me read to you this warning from CS Lewis:

I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronising nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.

CS Lewis

You have a choice to make. I beg you. Make the right one. Your eternity hangs on it.

Conclusion

In the end, the right response to all this can be seen in the shepherd's response to the good news they heard from the angels that night, for we read in Luke's gospel:

Luke 2:15-17

So it was, when the angels had gone away from them into heaven, that the shepherds said to one another, "Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us." And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger. Now when they had seen Him, they made widely known the saying which was told them concerning this Child.

The first response is that they made haste to go and see Jesus. And if you have never come to know Jesus as your Saviour — then this is your chance, not to think about, but to do something about it right now, before you walk out that door, or before you finish listening to the recording of this sermon.

The second response we see in the shepherds, is that after they had come to Jesus, they told everyone about Him. In fact, we read they made widely known the what they had heard themselves. So, if you already know Jesus as your Saviour, what are you doing to share your faith? Some of us are far too rusty in talking with others about the good news we have. Others of you I fear have no interest in telling others — you won't talk about your faith, you won't even share a simple post on social media to share the gospel. How can that be?!

Steven Curtis Chapman once sang these words:

*Think about this if we really have been given
The gift of life that will never end
And if we have been filled with living hope, we're gonna overflow
And if God's love is burning in our hearts well you know we're gonna blow
There's just no way to keep it in*

Steven Curtis Chapman

All of us have some serious decisions to make. How can any of us walk away from this good news unchanged? The only way that will happen is if we have stubborn and hard hearts. May that not be the case. Please, don't let that be the case in your life.

Let's pray.

Application questions

It's really important to know *what* happened at Christmas. Not based on tradition, but on the Bible. But it's even more important to know *why* these things happened. And then to do something about it. So think on these two questions as we finish our service this morning.

- Are you faithfully passing on the truth of the Bible? (or are you repeating mere traditions?)
- What are you going to do about this good news you've heard? (Seriously, what are you going to do about it?)

For the audio recording of this Bible study, and for additional studies, please see the DCF web site:



Deal Christian Fellowship
Simply teaching the Bible, simply

 <https://dcf.church>