

SUNDAY BIBLE STUDY NOTES

— **December 24, 2017** —

Pastor Les Smith

SERIES: The Greatest Gift

SERMON: Who Invented Christmas?

TEXT: Luke 2:1-20

Christmas is such a busy time for everyone. There are presents to wrap and meals to cook, and there is almost never enough time to do it all, especially when you have to make time for a trip to the mall to take pictures with Santa Claus. When I was a boy growing up, I used to wonder just who invented Christmas. I knew that we always had a Christmas tree, with tinsel and lights. We always had company for Christmas dinner, and we always had a few presents. I believed that the best thing about Christmas was the gifts, and I hardly slept on Christmas Eve night because of the anticipation of opening gifts on Christmas morning.

I had heard about Baby Jesus at church but I wondered who started all the gift giving in the first place, and in my little child mind, I could come up with only one answer that made sense...Santa Claus must have started Christmas...he had to be the one that invented Christmas.

The Birth of Jesus

Long ago, about 2,000 years, when King Herod ruled Judea (now part of Israel), God sent the angel Gabriel to a young woman who lived in the town of Nazareth. The girl's name was Mary, and she was promised to marry Joseph and was soon to become a mother. The angel Gabriel said to Mary, "Peace be with you! God has blessed you and is pleased with you." Mary was very surprised by this and wondered what the angel meant. The angel said to her, "Don't be afraid, God has

been very kind to you. The Holy Spirit will bless you and you will give birth to a baby boy, and you will call him Jesus. He will be God's own Son and His kingdom will never end.” Mary was very afraid, but she trusted God. “Let it happen as God chooses,” she replied to the angel. Gabriel also told Mary that her cousin, Elizabeth, who everyone thought was too old to have children, would have a baby boy and God would use him to prepare the way for Jesus.

Mary said goodbye to her family and friends and went to visit her cousin Elizabeth and her husband Zechariah. Elizabeth was very happy to see Mary. She knew that Mary had been chosen by God to be the mother of his Son. An angel had already told Zechariah that Elizabeth's baby would prepare people to welcome Jesus. He was to be called John. Mary stayed with Elizabeth about three months and then returned home to Nazareth.

Joseph was worried when he found out that Mary was expecting a baby before their marriage had taken place. He wondered if he should put off the wedding altogether. Then, an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Don't be afraid to have Mary as your wife.” The angel explained that Mary had been chosen by God to be the mother of his Son and told Joseph that the baby would be named Jesus which means 'Savior' because he would save people. When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel told him to do and took Mary as his wife.

At this time, the land where Mary and Joseph lived was part of the Roman Empire. The Roman Emperor Augustus wanted to have a list of all the people in the empire to make sure they paid their taxes. He ordered everyone to return to the town where their families originally came from, and enter their names in a register (or census) there. Mary and Joseph traveled a long way (about 70 miles) from Nazareth to Bethlehem because that is where Joseph's family came from. Most people walked but some lucky people had donkeys to help carry the goods needed for the journey. Joseph and Mary traveled very slowly because Mary's baby was due to be born soon.

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When they reached Bethlehem, they had problems finding somewhere to stay. So many people had come to register their names in the census; every house was full and every bed was taken in all of the guest rooms. The only place they could find to stay was with the animals. People often kept animals in the house, especially at night, and used them like 'central heating'. People normally slept on a raised/upper level with the animals below to give them extra warmth.

So, in the place where the animals slept, Mary gave birth to Jesus, the Son of God.

In those days, it was the custom to wrap newborn babies tightly in a long cloth called 'swaddling clothes'. Jesus' bed was the manger that the animals ate their hay from.

In the hills and fields outside Bethlehem, shepherds looked after their sheep through the long night. As the new day began, suddenly an angel appeared before them, and the glory of God shone around them. The shepherds were very, very scared, but the angel said, “Don't be afraid. I have good news for you and everyone. Today, in Bethlehem, a Saviour has been born for you. You will find the baby lying in a manger.”

Then many more angels appeared, lighting up the sky. The shepherds heard them praising God and singing, “Glory to God in the highest, and peace to everyone on earth.” When the angels had gone, the shepherds said to one another, “Let's go to Bethlehem to see what has happened.” So, the shepherds went to Bethlehem and found Mary and Joseph. The baby Jesus was lying in a manger as they had been told. When they saw him, they told everyone what the angel had said and all who heard the story were astonished. Then, the shepherds returned to their sheep, praising God for sending his Son to be their Savior.

The story that I just read for you is a paraphrase from Luke, chapter 2. It is from this story that we learn that God gave us Christmas. There are several important lessons that we want to be able to share with our friends and family when they ask

us about the true meaning of Christmas.

The first lesson that we learn from the story of Christmas is that when God gave us Christmas, it was according to His eternal plan. (1-7)

About that time, Caesar Augustus ordered a census to be taken throughout the Empire. This was the first census when Quirinius was governor of Syria. Everyone had to travel to his own ancestral hometown to be accounted for. So Joseph went from the Galilean town of Nazareth up to Bethlehem in Judah, David’s town, for the census. As a descendant of David, he had to go there. He went with Mary, his fiancée, who was pregnant.

⁶⁻⁷ While they were there, the time came for her to give birth. She gave birth to a son, her firstborn. She wrapped him in a blanket and laid him in a manger, because there was no room in the hotel.

God always planned to send Christmas. God decided who would give birth to Baby Jesus; he decided where and when Jesus would be born.

God has a plan for your life. He is working it out day by day. He has worked out who you will marry, who your kids will be, where you will live. You are not an accident. You are a part of the plan and purpose of God. Nothing can happen to you until god is ready for it to happen.

The second lesson that we learn from the story of Christmas is that when God gave us Christmas, He gave first to the meek and lowly instead of the high and mighty. (8-18)

There were shepherders camping in the neighborhood. They had set night

watches over their sheep. Suddenly, God’s angel stood among them and God’s glory blazed around them. They were terrified. The angel said, “Don’t be afraid. I’m here to announce a great and joyful event that is meant for everybody, worldwide: A Savior has just been born in David’s town, a Savior who is Messiah and Master. This is what you’re to look for: a baby wrapped in a blanket and lying in a manger.”

13-14 At once the angel was joined by a huge angelic choir singing God’s praises:

Glory to God in the heavenly heights, peace to all men and women on earth who please him.

15-18 As the angel choir withdrew into heaven, the shepherders talked it over.

“Let’s get over to Bethlehem as fast as we can and see for ourselves what God has revealed to us.” They left, running, and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger. Seeing was believing. They told everyone they met what the angels had said about this child. All who heard the shepherders were impressed.

Next year, Prince Harry and Megan Markle will be married at Buckingham Palace, a place suitable for royalty. The royal family and dignitaries will be present. But, the King of the World was born in stable with shepherds and animals in attendance. That is the message of Christmas. Jesus did not own property, He did not have a home, and he ate with prostitutes and thieves, because He came to seek and to save those who were lost.

The third and final lesson that we learn from the story of Christmas is that when God gave us Christmas, He gave us a message to keep and a message to share. (19-20)

Mary kept all these things to herself, holding them dear, deep within herself. The shepherders returned and let loose, glorifying and praising God for everything they had heard and seen. It turned out exactly the way they’d been told!

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The idea that God gave us Christmas is almost too much to take in. He looked down upon the world and saw that we were in darkness. In fact, before Jesus came, God had refused to even speak to His people for over four hundred years. And then, in a gesture of sacrificial love, the God of the universe stepped down from heaven, took on the form of a man, was born in squalor, lived a peasant’s life, and then died an ignominious death, all so it would be possible for us to have a relationship with God. The shepherds were shouting, but Mary was holding it all in. There are times when God is so good to us, we don’t have words. There are other times when we have to shout to the rafters, “I said I wasn’t going to tell nobody, but I couldn’t keep it to myself!”

Years ago, there was a very wealthy man who, with his devoted young son, shared a passion for art collecting. Together, they traveled around the world, adding only the finest art treasures to their collection. Priceless works by Picasso, Van Gogh, Monet and many others adorned the walls of the family estate. The widowed father looked on with satisfaction as his only child became an experienced art collector. But the day came when war engulfed the nation, and the young man left to serve his country. After only a few short weeks, his father received a message from the Army that his beloved son had been killed while carrying a fellow soldier to a medic.

On Christmas morning, a knock came at the door of the old man’s home, and as he opened the door, he was greeted by a soldier with a large package in his hand. He introduced himself to the man by saying, “I was a friend of your son. I was the one he was rescuing when he died. May I come in for a few moments? I have something to show you. I’m an artist,” said the soldier, “and I want to give you this.” As the old man unwrapped the package, the paper gave way to reveal a portrait of his son. Though the art critics would never consider the work a piece of genius, the painting did feature the young man’s face in striking detail, and seemed to capture his personality.

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The following spring, the old man became ill and passed away. The art world was in anticipation! According to the will of the old man, all of the art works would be auctioned. The day soon arrived, and art collectors from around the world gathered to bid on some of the world’s most spectacular paintings. The auction began with a painting that was not on any museum’s list. It was the painting of the man’s son. The auctioneer asked for an opening bid. The room was silent. “Who will open the bidding with \$100?” he asked. Minutes passed with not a sound from those who came to buy. From the back of the room, someone callously called out, “Who cares about that painting? It’s just a picture of his son. Let’s forget it and go on to the important paintings.” There were other voices which echoed in agreement. But the auctioneer replied, “No, we have to sell this one first. Now, who will take the son?” Finally, a friend of the old man spoke, “I knew the boy, so I’d like to have it. I will bid the \$100.” “I have a bid for \$100,” called the auctioneer, “Will anyone go higher?” After a long silence, the auctioneer said, “Going once. Going twice. Gone.” The gavel fell. Cheers filled the room and someone was heard to say, “Now we can get on with it!” But the auctioneer looked at the audience and announced the auction was over. Stunned disbelief quieted the room. Someone spoke up and asked, “What do you mean it’s over? We didn’t come here for a picture of some old guy’s son. What about all of these paintings? These paintings are worth millions! We demand that you explain what’s going on!” The auctioneer replied, “It’s very simple. According to the will of the father, whoever takes the son... gets it all.”

That is the essence of the story of Christmas: Whoever takes the Son gets it all! The Bible puts it like this: “God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.”