

Preparing for Christmas

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Bible Text: Luke 10:38-42; Matthew 2:1-16

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Luke 10 beginning at verse 38, page 1,613.

38 As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. 39 She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. 40 But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, 'Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!' 41 'Martha, Martha,' the Lord answered, 'you are worried and upset about many things, 42 but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.'

The word of the Lord. ["Thanks be to God."]

May we pray.

Lord Grant, as I share these thoughts with your congregation this day, here in the sanctuary and throughout the world, that they will touch hearts and help us to prepare for the coming of Jesus on Christmas Day. We pray in Jesus' name, amen.

Turn with me, if you would, to the gospel of Matthew chapter 2, Matthew chapter 2, page 1,497.

1 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem 2 and asked, 'Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.'

Let me comment for a moment. I'll never forget December of 1959. My brother was a freshman at the US Air Force Academy, which had just been completed, and they had a planetarium, and my parents and I traveled there. Daddy had bought a new Chevrolet station wagon, and it was a long drive. We picked up a lady and her son in Columbia, South Carolina, and headed west, and I had never been out of South Carolina and North Carolina before and just across the border into Virginia to visit my dad's brother, Walter. So this was a great adventure. I'll never forget it. It was very long. And so I saw this presentation in their planetarium about the star of Bethlehem because back then, even government institutions promoted the birth of Christ.

It was a very different era in 1959. Then in the fall of 1966, I took astronomy in college, and once again, I saw a presentation. And I've got to tell you, I concluded that the star of Bethlehem was not something that was a constellation at all, and you cannot date the birth of Christ from various astronomical phenomena. The star of Bethlehem, if you analyze it, was a very special thing that appeared to these wise men, or magicians, or whatever you want to call them, who were living in Iraq or Iran, because people back then tried to determine their lives by studying the stars in the sky, the movement of constellations and such things, especially meteors. And if you look in the text here, you discover as we go down to the next page and verse 9, that is Matthew 2:9:

9 After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was.

Now think about that for a moment. This phenomenon is a very special phenomenon. It is a supernatural phenomenon because the star had guided them to come to Judea. But they had not seen the star. But notice, you see after they heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was.

10 When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.

Have you ever been on a journey in life, and you think, "What am I going to do tomorrow?" God will let you know tomorrow what you need to do tomorrow, and he will let you know today what you need to do today (Matthew 6:34).

And so they saw the star again, and the star did something amazing, it guided them to the very place where the Lord Jesus laid, or where he was dwelling.

So it guided them, and it is clearly a supernatural phenomenon. How do we know about the time of Jesus' birth? Well, this second chapter of Matthew gives us pretty strong indications when it occurred.

Herod the Great, megalomaniacal ruler that he was, serving under the Roman Senate, died in the year 4 BC. I like to use BCE, which is the popular thing to get away from Before Christ and AD, *Anno Domini*, and that is **Before the Christian Era**. There's nothing common about our era. Muslims have different dates, so do other peoples, so I like to say **Before the Christian Era**, because that's what we're really talking about.

So Jesus was born **Before the Christian Era**, and how do we know that? Because Herod the Great, who's the guy here, died in 4 BC. Now we know something else. When Herod realizes that the wise men, the astrologers, had escaped and so had the child, he was enraged. You see here verse 13:

13 When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. 'Get up,' he said, 'take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.'

So anyhow, he takes the child to Egypt and then, verse 16:

16 When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi.

Now you see what's in view here. He understands the time when the Magi saw the star, and he's not taking any chances, and so he kills all the boys in the area of Bethlehem two years old and under. So let's factor that in for a moment and do a little thinking.

First of all, the gospel of Luke, if you turn over to the right for a moment, and you come to Luke chapter 2, you see on page 1,590:

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (Luke 2:1)

And notice in verse 4:

Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. (Luke 2:4-5)

Now, so here's what happens. You have there the visit of the shepherds, and you have the angels singing Gloria, and then you look over on page 1,591, and you look at verse 21.

On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise him, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he had been conceived.

And then look at verse 22:

When the time of their purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (quoting back from the book of Leviticus 12).

And then you have the appearance of Simeon and of Anna and so on, and then you go over to page 1,592 and verse 39:

When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth.

Let that sink in for a moment. They returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth.

So what I'm going to throw out to you is this: Jesus, Joseph, and Mary were living in Nazareth when all of this happened, and the angel of the Lord

comes in a dream and tells Joseph, “Get this child out of this area and go to Egypt” (Matthew 2:13-15), because that was out of the reach of Herod.

Herod the Great had great power and control over much of that region, and so the child Jesus is taken by his adopted father and by his mother, who also is a descendant of King David (As well as of Aaron: Luke 1:5-6, 31-33, 36 (relative of a descendant of Aaron; Luke 3:23, 38—genitive of relationship, rather than beget, as in Matthew’s genealogy), into Egypt, and there he stays until the death of Herod.

So here’s what we therefore can say.

The Lord Jesus Christ was born probably around 6 or 5 before the Christian Era, and he was born in Bethlehem. And they stayed in the area of Bethlehem in Jerusalem for close to two months in order to fulfill what was required in the book of Leviticus. And then they traveled north into the Galilee and lived back in Nazareth, where the Lord Jesus had been conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 1:18-21). And so this is important in figuring out the birth of Jesus, I think that it’s very likely that the Lord Jesus was born in December of 5 or 6 Before the Christian Era, and I think therefore, you know, it’s not out of the question they had a white Christmas.

My son-in-law, John Uhl, who is a pastor in the Texas Hill Country, and I traveled to the Holy Land in 2000, and we happened to go to Bethlehem, and we happened to experience snow in the late winter. We experienced snow when we were there. So it’s not out of the question, with our Western tradition, that it was a snowy day Not out of the question, December 25th, though we don’t know that for sure, of course, and the Bible never records the actual date that Jesus was born.

I find that interesting because the Bible is interested in one holy day for Christians, and what holy day is that? As our Presbyterian forefathers and mothers taught us, the only holy day under the New Testament is the Lord’s Day. And so again, Christians should be zealous to gather with other Christians on the Lord’s Day (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter XXI, “Of Religious Worship, and the Sabbath Day.”)

When used of a specific day of the week, as over against referring to the non-weekly holy days, the Sabbath always

refers to the period of time from sundown Friday until sundown Saturday. Early Christians did go to the synagogue on the Sabbath, but they did so for evangelistic purposes, and that was the day of the week when Jewish people were there (Acts 13:14, 44; 16:13; 18:4). But we find that the Church as a distinct entity did not worship then but appears to have worshiped on the next day, the first day of the week (Acts 20:7).

So what about Christmas? Well, what about Christmas is this, if we look at these matters, they neither are commanded us to do nor forbidden us to do, and so based on Christian tradition, I celebrate Christmas, and I celebrate Christmas on December the 25th, as I think it's not impossible that the Lord was born on December 25th in Bethlehem five or six years Before the Christian Era. So there.

Now let's think about Christmas for a moment because I think it's important. I believe it's very important that we recognize the incarnation of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Without Christmas, Good Friday would have no meaning. Without Christmas, Easter Sunday would have no meaning. It would just be the death of another man, though not the resurrection of just another man. But Jesus was not the first person to experience resurrection. And you can see that in the Old Testament (1 Kings 17:17-24; 2 Kings 4:32-37). I won't go through all the verses. You can see it even in the ministry of Christ where he raised people from the dead (Matthew 9:23-26; John 11:43-44).

So what do we have? Christmas. What is Christmas?

Christmas celebrates the time when God Almighty, without ceasing to be God in any sense whatsoever, joined himself by a miracle of the Holy Spirit with a single egg, an ovum, from the Blessed Virgin Mary. The Lord Jesus Christ never had a biological father. It was the miracle of the Holy Spirit who caused the Virgin Mary to conceive in her womb, and at the moment of that conception, God joined with humanity in that one single cell that then multiplied and multiplied over a period of nine months.

So, it's important that we celebrate the birth of Christ, even if we don't know absolutely when it occurred, and I want us to draw some lessons from this.

First of all, I want you to think about the day that Jesus was born, or the night that he was born. Who brought him gifts on that night? Nobody. Nobody brought gifts to the Lord Jesus that night. The shepherds were out in the fields (Luke 2:8-15). Who were the shepherds?

They were viewed by the elite as the *hoi polloi*, and they were nobodies, shepherds, but it's amazing that Almighty God saw fit to send the angel Gabriel to announce the birth of the Savior to the dregs of society. They were working people, but they were not the high and mighty. Not many mighty, not many noble. God chose the lowly of the world, though some of the chosen are high and mighty (1 Corinthians 1:26-29). And so God announces to the shepherds the great event that's occurred, and they say, "Come, let us now go unto Bethlehem to see this thing" (Luke 2:15). And what gifts did they bring him? Nothing. Zero, zip, nada. Wow, nothing.

Now, let's contrast that with the three kings, who weren't kings at all but were stargazers who predicted the future based on astronomical phenomena. They see the star where they are. Now think about it. These are pagans.

These are people who were around from the days of Assyria and Babylon and the Persian Empire, and they were stargazers. These are pagans. I find it striking that the Lord God Almighty chooses to reveal the birth of his Son, the Savior of the world, the King of the Jewish people, to reveal him to the down and outers near Bethlehem, and the pagan astrologers living in the East. Did they make preparation?

Oh, yes. They made great preparation. And they came, and they traveled a far journey and they brought with them gold and frankincense and myrrh. And in the verses we did not sing this morning of "We Three Kings," that symbolism is explained in those verses. And they come, and they've made great preparation to come, and they've traveled. How long did they travel? Probably at least a year (not that it took a year to travel, but it took a year from the time they saw the star in the East). And that helps us date the birth of Christ.

Now what lessons can we draw from that? I want us to draw lessons going back to the gospel of Luke and chapter 10 and I want to talk about the real Christmas as over against what we deal with. Luke chapter 10, page 1,613.

Christmas is the most nerve-racking, wasted, tense, going into debt phenomenon of our time. I want you to think about it for a moment. It really is. How many people almost go nuts preparing for Christmas? "I've got to do this. I've got to do this. I've got to buy this. I've got to go buy that. And I've got credit cards."

And I think back to the first time I ever got a credit card. I was in seminary by the time I got a credit card, and credit cards at that time were very, very rare. We didn't have electronic phenomena like we do today where they can rob you blind from Bangladesh or Pakistan or India or Russia or North Korea or go on down the list. We didn't have that. You could write a check; you could pay cash.

But something happened to the United States of America following World War II. Those that fought the Nazis and won, came back to America with a great optimism about the future, "We can do," and it's no wonder that Tom Brokaw wrote a book entitled, *The Greatest Generation*.

But what happened is, as time went on, debt becomes a huge factor. Before World War II, people had trouble being able to afford a home, but after World War II with many government programs established under Franklin Roosevelt and the benefits for veterans, people were able to buy homes on time and something weird happened, the invention of easy credit.

And so you've got to come to grips with this: people are driven by money. The love of money, says St. Paul, is the root of every single kind of evil (1 Timothy 6:10). And so what happens is this, people come back from World War II, and they remember the troubled times they were in. They remember the Great Depression. They remember the suffering. They remember the hardship. They remember all these things, and you know what they wanted to do? They wanted to make life better for their children and grandchildren than they themselves had had it. And there comes eventually the credit card, and the credit card now is something that is manipulated by powerful people to cause you to go into a mountain of debt.

Did the shepherds go into a mountain of debt when they came to visit the Lord Jesus Christ in that manger in Bethlehem? Of course not. They simply came and sat at his feet, or kneeled at his feet, or kneeled before his crib, which was a feeding trough for animals. They simply knelt there, and they worshiped him. They adored him. And while the pagan astrologers from the far country in the east made great preparation and came, they sure didn't charge this stuff.

And so here they come, a year later perhaps, and they offer the gifts to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Where are we in America today? First of all, we have largely displaced the Lord Jesus Christ in a manger that we would celebrate at Christmas, with Saint Nicholas.

Now let me tell you about Saint Nicholas (270-343 CE). He was a great man. He happened to be the Bishop of Myra, and Saint Nicholas is famous for one thing, really famous, well he's famous for several things.

He was famous because he was a very generous man who had some wealth, and he used secretly to give gifts to the poor in his diocese. So he's famous for that. When people had needs, he went and secretly quietly, privately, gave gifts to the poor. So he's famous that way.

But St. Nicholas is also famous for this, at the Council of Nicaea, what we call the Nicene Creed in its first form is written there across the Bosphorus from Constantinople. Arius denied the deity of the Lord Jesus Christ: that Jesus is not God. If you want to think about modern Arians, they come sometimes and knock on your door, and they offer to sell you magazines called the Watchtower.

So what did Saint Nicholas do at the Council of Nicaea? He slapped Arius in the face when Arius denied that the Lord Jesus Christ is God Almighty come in human flesh. So let's celebrate Saint Nicholas. Let's go slap (Joke, no don't slap them in the face), but let's reject the false teachings of the Jehovah's Witnesses that deny that Jesus is God come into flesh. And we don't need to follow Saint Nick's example of slapping somebody in the face.

That's Saint Nicholas, but what do we have today in modern America? And it starts, it starts right after Halloween and the music that's played, and then

the music that's changed from beautiful carols in the past to silly ditties, and they're pumped in.

"I'm dreaming of a white Christmas." You know, huh? As over against "Joy to the world, the Lord has come," which is a paraphrase of the Psalms (Psalm 98) by Isaac Watts. Beautiful Psalm. And so we have these things: "Jolly old St. Nicholas," and we have replaced the Lord Jesus Christ with an elf, an elf dressed up in a red suit, and obviously an obese elf. And I saw a cartoon just last night from the Far Side that really struck me as funny, and it was these two kids who are waiting to see Santa Claus come down the chimney. I think it was Bobby and Susie, I can't remember the names, said through "some quirk in the universe," they saw Santa Anna. And there you see this Mexican General coming down the chimney, coming out with his sword, come down their chimney. Now, that's obviously a joke, but my point is this:

Where are we, brothers and sisters in Christ? We're being manipulated by people to take our joy away because the joy, as we see in Luke chapter 10, is found by Mary, not by Martha. What did Mary choose to do? She chose, in verse 39 of Luke 10, she had a sister called Mary who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said.

The meaning of Christmas is to sit at the feet of Jesus. The meaning of Christmas is to adore the Lord Jesus Christ, the Christ child who became a real grown-up man and who died on the cross for our sins and rose again. That's the meaning of Christmas. But look at Martha. Look at Martha. Martha's all upset. She's distracted. "I haven't bought the gift for So-and-so. I haven't bought a gift for So-and-so."

Sandy said some things to me this week, "You need to go and get this and this and that." And I did. And I did charge. But I do pay the credit card off at the end of the month always because credit card interest is biblically usurious. And so I bought gifts. And I think it's lovely to send Christmas cards. We love to send Christmas cards and we love to get Christmas cards. It's a great way to get to know what's going on in people's lives.

But Satan wants to rob you and me of the joy of Christmas by all these distractions. Look at the attitude of Martha. And verse 40, Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked,

“Lord, don’t you care that my sister’s left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me.” “Martha, Martha,” the Lord answered, “you’re worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen that which is better, and it will not be taken away from her.” (Luke 10:40-42)

So in the name and authority of the Lord Jesus Christ, the King of kings and Lord of lords, I reject the modern American Christmas. It is of the devil. The devil wants you to be in a pile of debt. The devil wants you to be all upset and worried over what you’ve got to do. “Oh, I can’t stop.”

I’ll never forget preparations for Christmas morning when our children were little. I remember that Sandy had gotten a dollhouse that had tiny little copper screws, bolts, and nuts, and that Christmas, before Christmas morning, all of my fingertips were bleeding as I tried to hold the little, tiny nuts there with the bolts trying to screw them in. They were all bleeding.

I remember another Christmas when we had hidden out—and we used to have a garage in the back of our house when we lived in the city limits of Alexandria, Louisiana—we had hidden the thing and locked it up, and I was putting it together. And after they went to bed, I went to put this neat swing set that had parallel bars, and I got out, and it was bitter cold, and I started digging, and the snow is actually coming. We were having a white Christmas in Alexandria. And as I tried to put the thing in, there was no way I could get it level. It was so frustrating; it was enough to make a preacher cuss.

Preparations for Christmas. All the Lord wants from you for Christmas is to sit and adore him. Relax. Let it go. Nobody’s going to reject you because you didn’t buy them this perfect gift. What nonsense.

Sit at the feet of Jesus. Relax and enjoy Christmas, because Christmas celebrates the time when God Almighty, without ceasing to be God, became a real and true human being, just like you and me.

May we pray.

Lord, we thank you for the birth of Christ. We don’t know the exact date when he was born because you want us to observe every first day of the week

in celebration of his resurrection. But Lord, we also stand in a tradition of almost 2,000 years of celebrating the birth of Jesus in December, Lord, thank you for the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ. May we adore the Christ of God who was born for us.

In Jesus' name, amen.