



Experiencing Christmas

Annual celebrations, like the Passover for the Jews, become a part of the rhythm of life. They bring families, ethnic groups, and even nations together around a cause or a remembrance of a past event. Christmas is one of the celebrations that has found wide acceptance around the globe.

- Compare the different ways people celebrate or view the meaning of Christmas.
- Share some meaningful memories of your experiences with Christmas.

[Watch “My Son, My Savior” – Chapter 2 – The Prince of Peace is Born]

- *What struck home most as you watched?*
- *What questions emerge for you?*

The Real Christmas Story

Read Luke 2:1-7

- Describe what stands out in this portion of the account for you. Why?
- Imagine what ...
 - ...would have been the same for Mary as any mother with her pregnancy, birth, and care for her new firstborn child.
 - ...would have been so different for Mary and Joseph.

Continue by reading Luke 2:8-20

- What was remarkable about the appearance and message of the angels to the shepherds?
- Compare the reaction of the shepherds with the reactions of people to Christmas today. Why the difference?
- Put yourself in Mary’s place. What would you have been treasuring up and pondering in your heart at this point?

Song of the Angels

has become a regular song in Christian worship. Identify where it shows up.

The Real Ancestry of Jesus

Quickly skim through Matthew 1:1-17

- Summarize what his ancestry reveals about Jesus.

Read John 1:1-3,14-18

- Describe what John reveals about Jesus' origin, and why Jesus could make an impact like no one else.
- Consider also what the following passages reveal about Jesus:

Jesus told the Jews, *"My Father, whom you claim as your God, is the one who glorifies me... Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad... Very truly I tell you, before Abraham was born, I am!" At this they picked up stones to stone him*" (John 8:54-59).

[The people of Israel] Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen (Romans 9:5).

(Ready to learn more? See also Hebrews 1:1-12)

His Purpose is Recognized by the Faithful

Read Luke 2:21-40 – The Journey to the Temple

- Evaluate what it teaches us about Mary that she went through the Purification Rite (Leviticus 12:1-8) offering a sacrifice of a pair of doves in keeping with the Law of the Lord.
- How did it happen that Simeon (and later Anna) was there and could identify the baby as the Messiah?
- Verses. 29-32 became a song of praise for Christianity throughout the ages. What does it reveal about the baby
 - ...for Simeon?
 - ...for the world?
 - ...for you?

Song of the Simeon

Locate where this has become a regular song in Christian worship.

Growing in Wisdom and Favor...and Obedience

Read Luke 2:41-52

- What can you relate to Mary and her words to Jesus as a parent to a child?
- Evaluate what Jesus was pointing out to them when he told Mary and Joseph, *"Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?"*
- What lesson can parents and children learn from Jesus' words and his actions?

Preparing Hearts for the King

Read what John the Baptist says in John 3:22-35

- Identify what John reveals about Jesus and the effect of our relationship to him



The Real Christmas Story

Luke's account was the result of the research he had compiled from those who were eyewitnesses of each unfolding scene (Luke 1:1-2). You would expect that Mary in her later years was one of his main sources for the early part of this account. Who else would have known so many fine details of those events? Who else could have talked so clearly about the visits of the angels, the birth in a stable, and the dangers that pursued them?

Here again, God involves unlikely people in his plans at a specific point in time. This miraculous birth escapes the notice of kings or religious leaders. Instead, God sends the message to lowly shepherds as they tend their sheep at night. He turned a common group and a common night into an enduring proclamation of his entrance into this world—a story that has been retold for over 2,000 years. It is interesting to think how fearful Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds were when an angel appeared to them, but how non-threatening it was when God himself entered our world as a baby.

The Real Ancestry of Jesus

The story of Jesus goes back long before his birth in Bethlehem. He may have seemed like just another baby and was unnoticed by many, but what a remarkable origin and ancestry was embedded in this child! The angel Gabriel told Mary, "*The holy one to be born (from you) will be called the Son of the Most High.*" The apostle John also steps back in time to bring to light much more than meets the eye. The union of the divine and the human in one person is a mystery above our level of understanding.

Pause to think about it. God, the Creator, was developing as a normal baby in the womb, with distinguishable toes and fingers, and a beating heart. There in Mary's arms totally dependent on her care is the Almighty God who cares for the whole universe and keeps it in motion. The one who fills all space and time is in one place and time unable to move unless carried. But think also of this, if the Son of God, helpless in a mother's womb or in human arms, can rest at peace in his Father's care—so can we.

His Purpose is Recognized by the Faithful

Already with his circumcision at 8 days old, we see that the God who sets the laws in place puts himself under law (Galatians 4:4-7). When the time was completed for Mary's purification, as required by the Law of Moses, Mary and Joseph took Jesus to the temple in Jerusalem, about 6 miles away, "*to present him to the Lord*" (consecration of the firstborn).

Simeon blessed them and spoke to Mary what to expect. "*This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed*" (Luke 2:34-35a). They would soon experience the paranoia and hatred of King Herod at the thought of a rival to his throne. He determined to get rid of baby Jesus by killing all the boys two years old and under. To protect the child, an angel had already told Joseph to escape with his family to Egypt, living as refugees in the country where their ancestors had been slaves. This child would be the center of the explosive growth of the kingdom of God in an undetectable way in the hearts of people, a movement that cannot be stopped. Simeon also had said to Mary, "*And a sword will pierce your own soul too*" (Luke 2:35b). Like other mothers, Mary experienced times of fear, panic, or worry with this child. But in greater ways, what he taught and the way he was treated would challenge her often confused faith and emotions, especially as he is tortured and crucified.

Growing in Wisdom and Favor...and Obedience

After Herod died, Joseph and Mary moved back to the town of Nazareth. Besides growing up and becoming strong and filled with wisdom because of the grace of God upon him, nothing else is reported about Jesus' childhood until he was 12 years old. This may have been Jesus' first trip to Jerusalem to prepare for his Bar Mitzvah. Often teenagers start pulling away from parents to claim their own individuality. It was more than that for Jesus. When other boys his age were playing and joking with each other ... we see him in the temple amazing the teachers. But his parents didn't realize he was still there, until well on their way home from their 3–4-day journey to the Passover festival in Jerusalem.

Mary would be regularly challenged to understand her role as mother—to understand how her son would distance himself from her to focus on his Father's mission for him. He alone would carry out God's plan to rescue the world from its greatest enemy—eternal punishment. Yet we find him still perfectly obeying God's command to honor his father and mother. Every moment of his life he was providing perfect obedience to the will of his Father which God expected but never got from us. He put himself under the laws he created for us, so he could undo the curse of our failure to keep the law (Galatians 4:4-7). His perfect obedience to God is the obedience to the law that we can claim to be able to stand before God who demands perfection (Romans 5:15-19).

Preparing Hearts for the King

About six month's older than Jesus was his relative John who the angel had said *"will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, and turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord"* (Luke 1:17). When he grew up, John was frequently seen outside the city encouraging people, *"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near"* (Matthew 3:2). Mark tells us that people came confessing their sins and received a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (Mark 1:4-5). John pointed to someone greater than himself whose sandals he said he was not even worthy to carry. When he saw Jesus, he declared, *"Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"* (John 1:29)

Simeon prophesied that Jesus would cause the rise or fall of people and be a sign spoken against so that the thoughts of many hearts would be revealed. John the Baptist further clarified what Simeon had said about revealing the hearts of many.

And so begins the public ministry of Jesus with John preparing hearts to listen to and follow him. Like John who said his joy is that Jesus must become greater and I must become less, we can imagine Mary in humility recognizing that with her role also.

The angels that had appeared to the shepherds at Jesus' birth proclaimed, *"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."* The One who was born, Jesus, is the Prince of Peace. *"For he himself is our peace, ... He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near"* (Ephesians 2:14,17).

Put it into Practice:

- Mary pondered what she heard and saw. Reread the Christmas story and the event of Jesus in the temple and capture words or truths that you can incorporate into your life.
- Think of the words of John the Baptist. Daily gauge your heart. Is it in preparation mode or resistance mode to own up to sin and trust in Jesus for forgiveness and life?

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