

# The Good News of Christmas

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The Christmas story is probably very familiar to most of us here. In that familiarity there is a danger: that we become so familiar with the story and the memories attached to it that we fail to see its message. We fail to understand what the story would mean to those reading it shortly after it occurred. Sometimes we look over some of the most important details of the story simply because they are so well known to us. I want to read a short section of the text again and think about what some of these details mean for us:

*<sup>8</sup> And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. <sup>9</sup> An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.*

It's very easy to romanticize this part of the Christmas story – the shepherds in our minds are handsome and rugged and well-behaved. We picture them as David the shepherd, because why else would the angels come to them with the message of the Messiah's birth? This is far from the truth. Shepherds at the time of Jesus were at the bottom of society, barely looked on better than lepers. Some shepherds owned their sheep and cared for them well, but most were hired men that felt overworked and underpaid. They cared more for their own comfort than for the sheep in their care. Sometimes they would even sell some of the flock and lie about it to make a little extra money. Some shepherds were thought of basically as thieves.

Whether good men or thieves, all shepherds were one thing: dirty. Shepherds smelled like sheep. Living outdoors all the time doesn't encourage the best hygiene habits! They were not only dirty, but according to Jewish law were ritually unclean as well, touching things all day that would cause them to be excluded from the "right" religious circles.

It was for these very reasons that they were the perfect ones to hear about the birth of the Messiah: they weren't too busy. They weren't too smart to be fooled by that kind of thing. They weren't concerned about what others might think of them. They believed and went. When the angels announced the good news of Christmas, they come to the shepherds for a reason: it was for people like those shepherds that it was truly good news.

Those nearby in Jerusalem did not view it that way – they would try and ultimately succeed in killing Jesus. They were those who were knowledgeable, powerful, and religious. The message of Christmas and the mission of Jesus did not appeal to them because they thought they already had and knew it all. Christmas is for those who realize that they do not have anything to offer and that their knowledge will never be enough. Christmas is for the weak and the hurting. The Messiah didn't come with power and might and violence to deliver Israel: he came with weakness and filth and peace as a baby to deliver the world. He wasn't born in a palace, but in a barn. Why? Why would the God of the universe and creator of everything do this? Because that is the Gospel. That is the "good news". Our might and our goodness are

nothing. They are not the way to salvation. That is only good news for those that they have no might or goodness. Those who have never tried to convince themselves that they're good enough to make it on their own.

So what was the response of those who heard this good news? They went and saw the baby, powerless and small, and believed the truth: that what was in this stable was too big to be contained by the whole world. Their response?

*<sup>17</sup> When they had seen this, they made known the statement which had been told them about this Child. <sup>18</sup> And all who heard it wondered at the things which were told them by the shepherds. <sup>19</sup> But Mary treasured all these things, pondering them in her heart. <sup>20</sup> The shepherds went back, glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen, just as had been told them.*

They glorified God. How? They went and told everyone they could find about this strange and wonderful thing that was happening in the world. This is an important thing about the good news: it can't help but be shared! These shepherds heard and saw, and then they spoke. If this message was true as the angel had told them, it is the best news ever heard! Think for a moment about the change in the shepherds: They went from fear to joy, from being rejected to accepted, from nothing to being the first to bring the greatest news ever! This story of the first moments of Jesus' life set the stage for everything. Nothing has changed. The story of Christmas is the story of the Gospel. It is for those that are in need – which is all of us, whether we recognize it or not. As Jeff Dunn wrote, "Things have not changed since that night more than 2000 years ago. Jesus still accepts us as we are, without religious performances. He welcomes the lost, the least, the little, the fragile, the broken, the used, the discarded."<sup>1</sup>

Who is Christmas for? Matthew B. Redmond puts it this way:

- Jesus came for those who look in the mirror and see ugliness.
- Jesus came for daughters whose fathers never told them they were beautiful.
- Christmas is for those whose lives have been wrecked by cancer, and the thought of another Christmas seems like an impossible dream.
- Christmas is for those whose marriages are about to end.
- Christmas is for the son whose father keeps giving him sports gear when he wants art materials.
- Christmas is for smokers who cannot quit even in the face of a death sentence.
- Christmas is for prostitutes and adulterers who long for love in every wrong place.

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<sup>1</sup>Dunn, Jeff. <http://www.internetmonk.com/archive/losers-who-win>. Also some of the historical back ground comes from his blog post.

- Christmas is for college students who are sitting in the midst of the family and already cannot wait to get out for another drink.
- Christmas is for those who traffic in failed dreams.
- Christmas is for those who have squandered the family name and fortune—they want “home” but cannot imagine a gracious reception.
- Christmas is for children that can never do enough to earn their parents’ approval.
- Christmas is for parents that are never good enough for their children.
- Christmas is for parents watching their children’s marriage fall into disarray.<sup>2</sup>

Tomorrow is Christmas. As they say, “It’s the most wonderful time of the year”. For many of us, that is true. We spend time with family, we have favorite traditions and foods and so many things that make it a very special time for us. All of those things are wonderful. Christmas has a history and culture that is deep and rich. But in all of the gift-giving and eating, remember what the good news of Christmas is: it isn’t any of those things that we love so much. In fact, if we face the truth, it is the opposite: the good news of Christmas is about the Christmases that we’ve spent alone. The presents that we bought but never gave because we had a fight with our friend. It’s about the Christmas that we grieved a loved one that wasn’t with us anymore. It’s about the time we did something that we will always regret. The good news of Christmas is for all of the times that we’ve had “the least wonderful time of the year”.

The coming of Jesus brought joy to the world because the world is broken. Remember that tomorrow as you celebrate. Remember that Jesus came and did for us what we were too weak to do. Remember also the reason He did it: so that He would be king over all. Jesus, the name above all names. He became weak so that He might be glorified above all else. It is for Him that we celebrate. The One who is eternal had a birthday. The one who is all-powerful needed to have His diapers changed. The One who created all had to be fed. Christmas is truly amazing and impossible to understand when you take the time to think about what it all really means. Take the time tomorrow to think about who the good news of Christmas is for. Take the time to reflect on how much it cost for that good news to come to you. Jesus came to lift up the lowly and bring down the powerful. His kingdom is for slaves, runaways, and cheaters. They are the people that Christmas is for. If you are here today and you are a Christian, you know this. You know your need. Celebrate your need tomorrow. Share the joy of Christmas with someone else. Celebrate and give Jesus the glory!

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<sup>2</sup> Redmond, Matthew. <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/tgc/2010/12/16/christmas-is-for-those-who-hate-it-most/>.