

# Truth for Today

*The Bible teaching radio programme*

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## Christmas Broadcasts: Christmas Message 2008

Hello. I have a daughter who has always been extremely excited by Christmas. Even though she is now an adult she still loves this season of the year and is always reminding us how many days it is to Christmas even though we might be in September and there are several months to wait! Why does Christmas engender so much excitement? Why is Christmas so special? Surely it is the hope and expectation we associate with it; the promise of good things to come. The gifts and presents we love to receive; enjoying the company of family and friends. And certainly we all need to have hope, things that we can look forward to, a life without hope is by definition hopeless. It is extraordinarily difficult to continue for long in a hopeless situation.

So this Christmas I would like to think about the hope and expectation of what is often called the First Christmas. I want to recall some of the promises which had been made centuries earlier in the Old Testament about an event which in the western world, at least, has become the dateline for history. That occasion when a baby was born in the little town of Bethlehem in the Land of Israel over two thousand years ago. Babies are born every minute of every day around the globe, and whilst each are extremely special in their own circle, what was unique about this birth that two thousand years later it is still a cause for celebration?

I believe in the inspiration of Scripture, just as it is written in 2 Timothy 3:16: "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God". That is literally "God breathed", not just the thoughts or ideas, but the exact words of the original Scriptures were given by God. So I believe in the story of Creation as recorded in the early chapters of Genesis; I believe in the Virgin birth as recorded in the Gospels; I believe the account of the crucifixion of Jesus as recorded in the four Gospels; I believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ as recorded in the Gospels and elsewhere; I believe that He will return in person to take those who have trusted Him into heaven as recorded in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17; and I believe that He will later return to earth to reign in righteousness as recorded in 1 Corinthians 15 and elsewhere.

These are all fundamental truths central to the Christian faith and what I discover from each of them is that they bring a message of hope! If an Almighty God creates a perfect universe it is because He wants to communicate with us and make Himself known. When the Lord Jesus rose again from the dead after His crucifixion it brings hope of Salvation to all who will receive it and it brings hope to all who have lost those they love. If we know that Jesus will come again for those who love and trust Him, we can live our lives with hope, confidence and expectation. And central to these truths is the story of the nativity.

If we read the story of the Lord's birth in Luke's Gospel we discover that whilst most people were totally preoccupied with the day to day problems of living in a country occupied by a foreign power, there were still those who were waiting for, and expecting God's intervention in this world. We can read about two of them, Simeon and Anna, in Luke 2: "And, behold, there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon; and the same man was just and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel: and the Holy Ghost was upon him. And it was revealed unto him by the Holy Spirit, that he should not see death, before he had seen the Lord's Christ. And he came by the Spirit into the temple: and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him after the custom of the law, then took he Him up in his arms, and blessed God, and said, Lord, now let Your servant depart in peace, according to Your word: for mine eyes have seen Your salvation, which You have prepared before the face of all people; a light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel. And Joseph and His mother marvelled at those things which were spoken of Him. And Simeon blessed them, and said unto Mary His mother, Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel; and for a sign which shall be spoken against; (Yes, a sword shall pierce through your own soul also,) that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed. And there was one Anna, a prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Aser: she was of a great age, and had lived with her husband seven years from her virginity; and she was a widow of about eighty four years, who departed not from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day. And she coming in that instant gave thanks likewise unto the Lord, and spake of Him to all them that looked for redemption in Jerusalem," Luke 2:25-38.

Here then are two people, Simeon and Anna, who were consciously expecting God's intervention in this world. It wasn't just a vague hope, but something real and concrete that determined the way they lived. The verses we have just read tell us that Simeon was "waiting for the consolation (or, comfort) of Israel". Anna was also expecting and

waiting for God's intervention and spoke to all who like her "looked for redemption in Jerusalem". You sense that Anna would talk to anyone who would listen to her about her hope and expectation. And now the great day had arrived!

The coming of Messiah was the devout wish and expectation of most faithful Israelites, and the birth of Jesus was certainly the exact fulfilment of a large number of prophecies that had been made hundreds of years earlier, concerning the place and nature of His birth. Even the time of Messiah's birth is intimated. Clearly if there is one thing that we personally have no control over whatsoever, it is the place and timing of our birth! The prophet Micah had written centuries earlier: "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to Me the One to be Ruler in Israel, whose goings forth are from of old, from everlasting." Micah 5:2. We have all of us heard this verse read at various Carol Services but have we stopped to think about how amazing it is that the very village of our Saviour's birth should be foretold hundreds of years before?

Similarly with regard to the timing of the birth of Jesus it was written in the book of Daniel, "Know therefore and understand, that from the going forth of the command to restore and build Jerusalem until Messiah the Prince, there shall be seven weeks and sixty-two weeks". Daniel 9:25. A very exact period of time is specified, which starts at a very clearly specified event. Often in the Bible the phrase "a week" is used to define a period of seven years. King Cyrus, the king of Persia who controlled the land of Israel at that time gave a command as recorded in Ezra 6:3: "In the first year of King Cyrus, King Cyrus issued a decree concerning the house of God at Jerusalem: 'Let the house be rebuilt, the place where they offered sacrifices; and let the foundations of it be firmly laid'". Seven weeks and sixty two weeks are specified in the prophecy in Daniel,  $69 \times 7$  is 483. 483 years before the Baby was to be born the time of His birth is foretold! It's truly amazing!

But probably one of the most remarkable prophecies surrounding the birth of Jesus was made to King Ahaz. He had been told to ask God for a sign, but had declined to do so and "the LORD spoke again to Ahaz, saying, 'Ask a sign for yourself from the LORD your God; ask it either in the depth or in the height above.' But Ahaz said, 'I will not ask, nor will I test the LORD!' Then he said, 'Hear now, O house of David! Is it a small thing for you to weary men, but will you weary my God also? Therefore the LORD Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel'" Isaiah 7:10-14.

The prophecy of Isaiah 7 is truly remarkable in that it predicts the Virgin birth. "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son". You and I had no existence prior to our conception. The miracle of the Virgin birth is that it is the means used by God to introduce His beloved Son into this world. One who had a previous existence; indeed One who eternally existed but now would come into time and into this world! It's amazing and truly wonderful! His name was to be called "Immanuel" which means "God with us".

The Virgin birth also guards the absolute holiness and sinlessness of Jesus Christ. The Psalmist writes that, "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me." Psalm 51:5. But the holy and pure nature of the Lord Jesus is safeguarded by the Virgin birth. The angel speaking to Joseph, who was engaged to be married to Mary, confirms this when he says, "that which is conceived in [Mary] is of the Holy Spirit." Matthew 1:20.

So the wonder of the first Christmas is that "God is with us," Immanuel. I don't know about you but as I look at the problems that are widespread through this world I sometimes wish that God would intervene in a dramatic and obvious way. "Oh, that You would rend the heavens! That You would come down! That the mountains might shake at Your presence" Isaiah 64:1. Isaiah was frustrated to see so much injustice and suffering that he wanted God to intervene in terrible and majestic power. God did intervene, He did come down, not as Almighty God consuming all before Him but as a baby, dependent and vulnerable!

In recent months we have experienced the worldwide financial crisis that has shaken huge and respected institutions to their very foundations. Governments of many countries intervened with mind boggling sums of money to shore up these banks and try to bring stability and calm to ordinary people. You couldn't switch on the radio or television without being bombarded with gloomy news and predictions. The governments of these various countries intervened to deal with a very serious problem, admittedly one of their own making. The size and nature of the rescue package would confirm to us the size and seriousness of the problem. At Bethlehem God intervened in a much more serious crisis in the history of this world and the way He intervened would indicate to us how serious the problem was. The shame though is that at that very moment hardly anyone knew or cared!

What an amazing manifestation of God! He sent the only One who could truly represent and express Him here, His own beloved and only Son, to be born, to grow up, to live here in the ordinary circumstances of life and ultimately to die like a common criminal, rejected by His own people. What a remarkable God is disclosed to us by the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, who was Himself completely and eternally God and yet became a man. "Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: but made Himself of no reputation, and took upon Him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: and being found in fashion as a man, He humbled Himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross" Philippians 2:6-8.

Can you credit it? The Creator of heaven and earth, the Sustainer and Maintainer of all things was born a baby at Bethlehem! God had never been seen in this way before! This is the real Christmas story! We are to be introduced by the Son of God to the true and Living God by One who is so accessible and approachable. He has come amongst us in the most unthreatening way. He is God, so He can manifest God perfectly but He is also a real man and so is accessible to us. Paul wrote to his son in the faith, Timothy, and expressed it in this way: "For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus; who gave himself a ransom for all" 1 Timothy 2:5-6.

But this verse also emphasises something that I have been trying to underline; the Christmas Story in itself is not enough. The birth of Jesus was not the answer to any of the problems of mankind. It was absolutely amazing, but it was not the answer. It was the beginning but not the end, and if we never get beyond the Christmas Story we get nowhere, we miss the whole purpose of what God was introducing. Let's read some more verses from the Gospel of Luke.

"Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 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 Saviour, 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!'" Luke 2:8-14.

I am sure most of us are fairly familiar with this story. Mary and Joseph had had to leave their home village and travel to Bethlehem at the behest of the Roman Emperor, Caesar Augustus, to be registered in the census he wanted to conduct. Mary was heavily pregnant when their journey started and by the time the couple arrived at Bethlehem the baby was about to be born. Luke records simply that they had to make use of a manger "as there was no room for them in the inn" Luke 2:7. This was literally true as I am sure Bethlehem was crowded with visitors because of the Roman Census that was being conducted, but would also prove to be figuratively true of the Lord Jesus in later life "He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him." John 1:11.

The baby Jesus is born in the most humble and depressing of environments. The words of the carol capture the moment well; "How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given". Not that the actual birth process of the Lord Jesus was in itself miraculous and I am sure for Mary it was painful, extremely uncomfortable and noisy. However in the hustle and bustle surrounding the census it was largely unnoticed. Rather than being announced to the important civic leaders of Bethlehem, or King Herod at Jerusalem, it is the shepherds on the hills around the town who have this most dramatic announcement made to them.

And the announcement is that a Saviour had been born that very day! What do you think these shepherds looked for from a Saviour? Did they hope for someone who could free them and their country from the Romans? Did they look for someone who could relieve them of the grinding poverty of their existence? We are told the real purpose of the Saviour's birth in Matthew's Gospel: "You shall call His name Jesus, for He shall save His people from their sins" Matthew 1:21. So the Baby in Bethlehem had come to save His people from their sins. It is the purpose for which Immanuel had come.

The angel introduced the announcement to the shepherds with the words, "Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people". I wonder if the shepherds were disappointed with what they found? For them the night had started much like any other; the shepherds had gathered the flock together and had settled down for the long lonely night on the hills. Dramatically they had been awakened with this vision of angels and the startling announcement "good tidings of great joy". Were they disappointed? I don't think so! They returned from their visit to the Baby "glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen." Luke 2:20.

What do you think would be the reaction of people today if they received a similar message? What would your reaction be? We have so many things that we hope for, so many different things that we would love to see happen. If you were promised good news of great joy what would you be expecting? A new car? A crime free environment? A solution for world poverty? Or Jesus, a Saviour, who will save His people from their sins. Is this on anyone's Christmas present list? But it is good news of great joy for all people. It is the one thing we all need whether we realise it or not, a Saviour, who will save us from our sins.

So the real Christmas message starts at Bethlehem, but doesn't end there. We can follow the story of the Lord Jesus to Calvary. We can be amazed at the purity of His life, we can marvel at the patience and kindness He displayed. Still today the wisdom with which Jesus taught and the principles He preached would lead, if followed, to a much more attractive and fairer society, but we must get to Calvary and realise that there Jesus "bore our sins in His own body on the tree" 1 Peter 2:24. At Calvary the promises of Bethlehem are fulfilled and the expectations of those like Simeon

and Anna are not only met but exceeded. This really is good news of great joy and it is for all people. God will one day deal with all the other problems that afflict human society, but first He has dealt with the root of the problem, sin in the lives of individuals.

At Calvary, God as it were, delivered on the promises of Bethlehem, and through the sacrifice of His own Son, Jesus, provided a righteous basis for the forgiveness and blessing of all who will repent and accept His mercy. It is the glorious opportunity for each of us to enjoy an intimate and eternal relationship with a loving Father God.

However Bethlehem is also the guarantee that God's promises are absolutely faithful and reliable. "For all the promises of God in Him are Yes, and in Him Amen, to the glory of God through us." 2 Corinthians 1:20. The meticulous accuracy with which centuries old prophecies were fulfilled remind us yet again of God's faithfulness. The wonder of the incarnation of God's Son, Jesus Christ, reinforces to us the greatness of God's love. So this Christmas, whatever else we may do, let's join the Apostle Paul and say, "Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!" 2 Corinthians 9:15.

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