

Christmas Eve 2004

What Is Christmas?

Matthew 1:21

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Scripture

In Matthew's description of Jesus' birth, we read that before Mary and Joseph came together to consummate their marriage, Mary was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose Mary to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. . . ." And then, what the angel said next is what I would like to consider briefly this evening. He said to Joseph in Matthew 1:21:

²¹ She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."
(Matthew 1:21)

Introduction

As we consider Jesus' birth this Christmas Eve, I want to ask the question, "What is Christmas?"

How many people have stopped this Christmas season to ponder the true meaning of Christmas? Do you know what the true meaning of Christmas is?

Lesson

Sometimes it is easier to get at a definition of a word or concept by looking first at what it is not. I believe that will help us answer the question: "What is Christmas?"

I. What Christmas Is Not

There are many things that Christmas is not. Let me list just a few for you.

First, Christmas is not a spirit. How many times have you heard people talk about the “Christmas spirit”? We hear about this on the radio and TV, and read about it in the newspapers.

“The spirit of Christmas,” they say, and then proceed to tell us what that spirit is.

It is love or joy or generosity or being kind or doing nice things or peace on earth.

At this time of the year we are flooded with movies, especially on TV, that emphasize the “spirit of Christmas,” whatever that is.

Now, I don’t want to suggest that there is no place for love or joy or generosity or kindness and so on at Christmas.

But I do want to say that these things are not a definition of Christmas.

Second, Christmas is not a sentiment. Some people associate fond memories and traditions with Christmas.

Those are okay in their place but, again, that is not the core meaning of what Christmas is.

And third, Christmas is not the giving and receiving of gifts. Many people work very hard in the days leading up to December 25 to make sure that we have gifts for family and friends. Some of us still have enough child in us to wish for certain gifts too!

Of course, no matter how hard we try to “de-commercialize” Christmas for our children, what is the one word that children associate with Christmas? Why, *gifts*, of course!

It is not wrong to exchange gifts at Christmas, but the giving and receiving of gifts is not what Christmas is all about.

Well, then, if that is what Christmas is not, what is Christmas?

II. What Christmas Is

The word *Christmas* is made up of two words: *Christ* and *mass*. The word *Christmas* means, therefore, a mass or religious service in commemoration of the birth of Christ. Christmas is a celebration of the birth of Christ.

Interestingly, the Church did not start celebrating the birth of Christ as a separate event until the 4th century! The date of December 25 was chosen as the day to celebrate the birth of Christ in order to counter the pagan festivities associated with the winter solstice. Since 274 AD, under the Emperor Aurelian, Rome had celebrated the feast of the “Invincible Sun” on December 25.

So Christmas is a celebration of the birth of Christ. Now, we might ask, why do we go to so much trouble to celebrate the birth of a baby born 2,000 years ago?

The answer is given to us in Matthew 1:21, where we read the words of the angel to Joseph: **“She [i.e., Mary] will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”**

You see, Jesus was no ordinary baby. All babies that are born are ordinary babies.

A little over sixteen years ago, my daughter Lauren was born to Eileen and me. As a proud father I would say that she was not an ordinary baby—she was an extraordinary baby!

Jesus, however, was not an ordinary baby. In fact, he was not even an extraordinary baby. No. Jesus was a supernatural baby!

Jesus was a supernatural baby in several different ways.

First, Jesus was a supernatural baby in the way in which he was conceived. Mary became pregnant by means of the Holy Spirit’s work in her womb. We don’t understand that mystery, but that is what the Scriptures tell us about Jesus’ conception.

Second, Jesus was a supernatural baby in that he had two natures in one person. Jesus was fully man and also fully God in that one body.

Third, Jesus was supernatural in that he never sinned. Unlike you and me, who struggle with sin on a daily basis, Jesus never once committed a single sin throughout his entire life.

But most of all, Jesus was a supernatural baby in that he came to save his people from their sins. There are many problems that we as humans are able to solve. But the one problem that we cannot solve is the problem of sin. With all of the advances in technology and science and so on, there has never been any progress made with regard to the problem of sin.

The reason Jesus was born was to take care of the problem of our sin. That is why he came to earth.

If you read the Bible, you will find that Jesus died on a cross to pay the penalty for our sin. The reason Christmas is so meaningful to so many is that we know that Jesus died to pay for our sins.

This Christmas I would like to remind you that Christmas is a celebration of the birth of a baby. But not just an ordinary baby. Not even an extraordinary baby. But a supernatural baby! Jesus was born **to save his people from their sins.**

Conclusion

Now, Jesus only saves people who do two things.

First, Jesus only saves people who acknowledge that they are sinners in need of a Savior. If you are to be saved by Jesus, you must believe that you are a sinner in need of a Savior. You must admit your sin to Jesus and ask him to forgive you for your sin.

And second, Jesus only saves people who place their trust in him alone to forgive them. You must believe that only Jesus—not yourself or anyone else—can forgive you and grant you eternal life. Jesus is the only one who can save you from your sin.

So, this Christmas, don't get confused about the meaning of Christmas. There are lots of things that go along with our celebration of Christmas, and most of it is okay in its place. But

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essentially, Christmas is the celebration of the birth of Jesus, the one who was born **to save his people from their sins**. Amen.

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*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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1. www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/Sermons
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