

OBEY NOW AND BE AMAZED LATER

(Finding the Heart of Christmas in our Daily Lives in 2020)

Christmas Passages from Matthew and Luke – Pastor Richard P. Carlson

Have you been pondering in your heart the meaning of Christmas this year? Have you been thinking about what it means to follow the heart of God and the example of Jesus at this beautiful season that comes at the finale of this difficult year? In many ways, the heart of Jesus coming at Christmas should move us all to obey Him, His Word, the voice of His Spirit, and His promptings. James 2: 22-23 is powerful relating to the example of Abraham. We read, “You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works. And the Scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness, and he was called a friend of God.” Jesus reiterated this to His disciples in John 15: 14, and for all of us when He declared, “You are My friends, if you do what I command you.” By using the word friend, David Jeremiah said, “By “friend” Jesus meant someone with whom He would communicate and co-labor, someone He could trust to carry out His will when He returned to heaven.” That leaves each of us this Christmas with a challenging, but awesome question. “Am I the kind of disciple that Jesus sees as a friend? Am I committed to obeying His commands? Can He count on me to fulfill His mission in His absence? Beloved, it is one thing to be the friend of man, but it is quite another thing to be the friend of God. Oswald Chambers well said, “The golden rule for understanding in spiritual matters is not intellect, but obedience.”

The Christmas story in its simplest form, is simply reading the words, and putting ourselves, into the place of the wise men, the shepherds, Mary, Joseph, Simeon, and Anna. The Christmas story reveals the path of obedience that makes Christmas the beginning of the greatest story ever told. Today I want us to examine how learning from these main characters surrounding the birth of Jesus, is how we can learn the heart of Christmas—which is, “obey now, and be amazed later.” We are going to examine five ways this obedience was manifested that first Christmas.

ARE WE AS THE WISE MEN, WILLING TO OBEY GOD’S PROMPTING, IN HIS STAR OR SIGNS, REGARDLESS OF THE HAZARDS? (I.)

Turn in your Bibles to the passage in Matthew 2: 1-12. Notice verses 1-2. It is likely that these wise men, came from the east—meaning Persia. These wise men were originally the priestly tribe among the Medo-Persians. They were the recognized teachers of religion, the science of medicine, and for foretelling coming events by studying the stars. The prophet Daniel was the chief wiseman among the Persian wisemen hundreds of years earlier in 534 BC. We read in Daniel 2: 48, “Then the king gave Daniel high honors (after interpreting his dream) and many great gifts, and (he) made him ruler over the whole province of Babylon and chief prefect or

bishop over all the wise men of Babylon.” In Daniel 5: 24-31, Daniel interpreted the handwriting on the wall of king Belshazzar’s palace, “Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin.” The meaning was, “God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end; you have been weighed in the balances and found wanting. Your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and the Persians.” That night Darius the Mede captured Babylon and Belshazzar was killed. That is how Daniel rose to power as a wise man in the Medo-Persian empire under kings Darius and Cyrus. These wise men were earnest truth seekers, who had quite probably, read the words of Daniel who spoke about a prince or a king coming, the Messiah, the anointed prince. These wise men in Matthew 2, hundreds of years later, still it seems, believed the Word of God from one of their own men, Daniel. The appearance of the star prompted them because the years specified by Daniel for a king to be born to the Jews, had arrived. This bright star that burst into view in all its brilliance, was their signal this Messiah the Prince was born.

Throughout the East, this prophecy of Daniel was well known, and there was an expectancy of the coming of a king connected with the Jews and Jerusalem. Haggai prophesied in Haggai 2: 7 that the “Treasure or the Desire of all nations will come in with a mighty shaking of all the nations, so that glory would fill His house in Jerusalem.” By probably reading Daniel’s prophecy, with this expectancy of a coming king, that was enough light for these wise men, with the coming of this new star, for them to set out on an 800-mile trek across the desert sands, perhaps on camels to Jerusalem. Assuming 10 miles per day you end up with 80 days of actual travel over hot desert sand. When God gives us not one book—Daniel, but all 66 books, and He prophesies many signs that have come and are coming true, why is it so difficult for us to believe God, to obey His Word, and to follow His promptings? What has God presented to you this past year, that He has given for you to do? Have you moved out to follow the Lord’s promptings?

Last Thursday, Officer Moshada called me from the Greyhound Bus Station. A native American was stranded here on his way to Riverton. He was pitifully helpless, in a wheelchair, from having a massive stroke, and he had no transportation as a snowstorm was setting in. Reggie was seated outside as the snow was falling. I told Officer Moshada, “I will try.” I decided to go ask some of the ladies just getting out of Bible Study. They suggested Aaron Mays as a person to ask. I called Aaron who recently twisted his left ankle, and then his right knee went out and on crutches. When we talked, I doubted he could even drive, but he said, “I can drive; I’ll do it.” I supplied Aaron with benevolent funds to use to get Reggie up to Riverton, and I gave him God’s promise in Matthew 25: 40, “Inasmuch as you did it unto one of the least of these, My brothers, (to Reggie Shakespeare,) you did it to Me.” Aaron Mays proved himself last Thursday to be a wise man, willing to help in one of the most amazing gifts of love at Christmas to this native American. Aaron got back to Rock Springs from Riverton, Wyoming

and Ethete, at 9: 47 PM, he called me, and I told him I was so sorry to put him through such a trial. He said, “No, Pastor, I needed these hours with the Lord.” On Friday, Aaron came in and asked me to read what he wrote in his journal—2 full pages. Let me read part of those two pages. “Pastor Carlson called me at 12:30 PM today and asked if I would take this gentleman to Riverton, Wyoming—Reginald Shakespeare? He is 56 years old, wheelchair bound. He had a stroke in 2002 and lost movement in his legs. He told me, in his whole right side, all feeling was gone. He lost his joy in 2002 and was put out on the streets. He told me he accepted Jesus in 1994 and worked at an Indian church in Minneapolis for a couple of years, evangelizing and praying for people. When I met him at 1:30 PM this afternoon, I drove him to Riverton. We talked. He prayed for the lunch I bought him at McDonalds. Thank you, E-Free for fuel and food. How much humiliation can a man take? I hope that I got to entertain an angel as Hebrews 13: 2 states, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by this, some have entertained angels without knowing it. This poor man, like Job, wasn’t praying for life. He was praying for death. I said he was home where he was born. The man was kicked out of a nursing home in Salt Lake City. He had slippers, a shirt, pants that were way too big with no belt, one sock, a jacket, and a wool blanket the police gave him. He had a plastic bag with medicine, was seated in a junior wheelchair, way too small for this 275-pound man. His pants fell-down, over his feet, as we got him up out of the wheelchair to put him in my truck. Reggie was cold, naked, had bad bed sores, had a colostomy bag, and he wanted to die. I am crying. He just wanted to make it into Ethete, be dropped off and freeze to death where he was born. I could not imagine all the pain he was in. His grandfather’s home in Ethete was destroyed and the property sold. He had not been to Ethete since 1989. All hope was gone for this man. I went to Riverton and purchased clothes, a duffel bag, and winter boots for Reggie. I gave him one of my Bibles. I cried all the way home and prayed and prayed for him.” I ask each of us, “What is God calling you to obediently do as you contemplate His challenge of obedience this Christmas? Secondly,

ARE WE AS THE SHEPHERDS, WILLING TO RISK OUR GREATEST INVESTMENTS AND WASTE NO TIME TO OBEY GOD AT ONCE? (II.)

Turn to Luke 2: 15-20. Notice the timing of this. Luke 2: 8 tells us that these shepherds were “keeping watch over their flocks by night.” Who were they? They were so unlikely a choice as the first ones to be called to go and witness the birth of Messiah Jesus. These shepherds were despised by the orthodox leaders of that day, because these hardworking men were unable to keep the details of the ceremonial law. They could not be shepherds and observe all the meticulous hand-washings and rules and regulations. Their flocks kept them constantly in the fields, demanding their attention and protection. These shepherds just outside Jerusalem on the hills surrounding Bethlehem, were temple shepherds who kept watch over their flocks by day and night, and they provided a constant supply of perfect, spotless, unblemished offerings to be available for morning and evening sacrifices.

These shepherds were most probably in charge of the flocks from which the Temple offerings were chosen. It is fitting that God came to announce to these shepherds of the Temple lambs to make them first to see the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. We are not given all the details, if all these shepherds left their flocks or if they left one or two shepherds behind, or if they just left their dogs to guard the sheep from predators, wolves, coyotes, bears and lions. What we do know for sure is that they lost no time, worrying about their sheep, after hearing the announcement of Jesus' birth. No, forsaking all else, they ran, to make haste to go find Mary and Joseph, and the baby Jesus lying in a manger. Let me challenge us this morning that when we are chosen by God to do anything, all delays are dangerous. The longer we go without doing what God desires, the sadder our lives become. In 1836, Adam Clarke said, "He who delays, to seek Jesus, when the messengers of God, bring him glad tidings of salvation, risks his present safety and his eternal happiness. Oh, what would the damned in hell give for those moments in which the living, hear of salvation; had they the same possibility of receiving it now? Be wise. Acquaint thyself now with God and be at peace; thereby good will come unto thee."

ARE WE AS MARY, WILLING TO ACCEPT A CHOSEN APPOINTMENT OBEYING GOD WHEN IT CONTRADICTS TRUTH AS WE KNOW IT?

(III.) Notice this account in Luke 1: 30-38. The same angel came to Zechariah who came to the virgin Mary. When Zechariah was told he and Elizabeth in their old age would have a son, John the Baptist, he asked how he could know this for sure. We read in Luke 1: 19-20, "And the angel answered him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time." Mary asked an information question that any teenage virgin lady would have asked. It was not doubting, but it was asking for an informed answer when Mary knew she was still a virgin, and virgins do not conceive.

When the angel told her about the Holy Spirit coming upon her and the power of the Most-High overshadowing her, so that she would bear the Son of God, Mary had no more questions, informational or logical, nor did she protest God's choice or her capability or God's wisdom or design in choosing her. Mary blows us away with her amazing response to God's sudden, but sacred appointment of her, a virgin to bear the baby Jesus. We read in Luke 1: 38, "And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." The wise men followed the Word, knowing they must go to Jerusalem, and from there, they followed the star which appeared again in Jerusalem to lead them to the place in Bethlehem where the Child Jesus was. The shepherds received the announcement Jesus was already born in Bethlehem, and they heard where they would find Him. The they beat-feet it to make it at once to see the gift of Jesus. The wise men had

persistent obedience. The shepherds had prompt obedience. Mary obeyed in a totally different way. She accepted in her heart and spirit that she was to bear Messiah Jesus. She could accept God's choice of her, or object and deny God's choice of her. But she accepted the will of God from all creation. Leaving Nazareth with haste, Mary was on her way to the house of Elizabeth who was 6 months along in her old age. God's work was immediate, for Elizabeth cried out to Mary, "Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb." Mary was not far enough along for any modern instrument to have known she was pregnant, but John the Baptist in Elizabeth's womb knew, and he leaped in his mother's womb. When we say yes to doing God's will, and being His instrument, instantly we are anointed for the task. Fourthly,

ARE WE AS JOSEPH, WILLING TO CHANGE OUR MIND, WHEN OBEYING GOD IS THE HARDEST DECISION OF OUR WHOLE LIFE?

(IV.) Turn with me to Matthew 1: 18-25. We have no word about how Mary told her betrothed, Joseph, that she was three months along when she returned from her 3-month journey to the hill country to be with Elizabeth in her final trimester before John the Baptist was born. All we know from this text is that Joseph did not buy into Mary's testimony that an angel appeared to her, and that the angel Gabriel told her she was to be the virgin mother of our Lord. Joseph, just like you and me, upon hearing Mary had heard from the Lord, since it involved him, wanted nothing to do the bizarre idea, because God did not give him the word as well. Had Joseph trusted the integrity of his beloved betrothed, what a difference it would have made for both Mary and Joseph. Imagine the hurt inside Mary when she realized the man she was betrothed to, was backing out from their relationship together, rejecting Mary's witness about God's choice of her to bear Messiah Jesus. Also, imagine the turmoil, anger, and resolution inside Joseph, being a just and righteous man, would never put Mary to open shame to have her stoned to death. So, he resolved, because he rejected God had spoken to Mary, to do the logical thing—to put her away or divorce her quietly. Although there was no intimacy in betrothal, the only way to end a betrothal was divorce. There is no more violent thing we can do as a spouse than to divorce our spouse. That was what Joseph was about to do.

By the way, if Joseph listened to his parents, or Mary's parents, or the townspeople, the matter was clear—Mary made up this tall tale to cover infidelity. But Mary was not unfaithful to Joseph. God rarely repeats a visit to a spouse—only here and with Manoah's wife, and then, to them both, before the birth of Samson. One infinitely greater than Samson, was being carried in Mary's virgin womb, the very Son of God. Therefore, the same angel Gabriel appeared to Joseph in a dream, and he gave Joseph the same message he had delivered from heaven to Mary. Joseph was slow to believe this word from the Lord, but when he heard it himself, from the angel, he did as the angel commanded him. He took Mary to be his wife,

and he refused to be intimate with her until after the child was born. What an amazing man now, he obeyed the angel, and he named him Jesus.

This week, I read the words of Oswald Chambers that speak to this most difficult decision of Joseph's life, and his final decision to be loyal to God and to Mary. He wrote, "It is only the loyal soul who believes that God engineers circumstances. (Romans 8: 28) We take such liberty with our circumstances; we do not believe God engineers them, although we say we do; we treat the things that happen, as if they were engineered by men. To be faithful in every circumstance means that we have only one loyalty, and that is to our Lord. Suddenly God breaks up a particular set of circumstances, and the realization comes that we have been disloyal to Him by not recognizing that He had organized them. We never saw what He was after, and, that leading will never be repeated all the days of our life. The test of loyalty always comes just there. If we learn to worship God in the trying circumstances, He will alter them in two seconds when He chooses. The idea is not that we do work for God, but that we are so loyal to Him that He can do His work through us — "He reckons on you for extreme service, with no complaining on your part and no explanation on His." God wants to use us as He used His Son." Fifthly,

ARE WE AS SIMEON AND ANNA, WILLING TO WAIT OBEDIENTLY FOR GOD'S TIMING AND MOVE ONLY WHEN LED BY THE SPIRIT?

(V.) We heard Luke 2: 25-38 about Simeon who was an old, old man waiting for the comfort, consolation, and the Messiah of Israel. God had revealed to him, Luke 2: 26 that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. When Simeon was told inside his soul, "Go now to the temple," he came in the Spirit, and blessed God calling the baby Jesus he held up in his arms, "a Light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to God's people Israel." Now the later amazement begins to flow. When the wise men followed the prompting of the Word of God's prophet Daniel and obediently followed the sign of the new star, they ended up in Bethlehem on their knees, worshipping the Christ-child, offering Jesus their gold, frankincense, and myrrh—Matthew 2: 10-11, When the shepherds obediently made haste to see Jesus, they returned to their flocks telling everyone along the way and glorifying and praising God—Luke 2: 20. When Mary obediently received her charge to be the mother of our Lord, she received two responses, Elizabeth's blessing, and she said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God, my Savior." – Luke 1: 46-47. Yet soon she received rejection by Joseph and her city of Nazareth, until God stepped in and sent Angel Gabriel to Joseph.

You and I may have mixed reviews when we obey Jesus. I doubt that few, but Mary, lauded Joseph for obeying the voice of the angel Gabriel. But believe me, when Simeon and Anna prophesied over Jesus, Joseph and Mary marveled, Luke 2: 33. Obedience now, amazement later. The challenge of obedience is the heart of Christmas. Our task is to obediently follow the Word, the signs and stars, or the

promptings God gives us, like the wise men. Our task is to obediently make haste to go see for ourselves what God announces to us by His angels, His Spirit, or His Word, as the shepherds did. Our task is to obediently let God's Word trump our own wisdom, and to assume our choice by God to be His servant as Mary did. Our task is to obediently be loyal to the voice of God over our own strong logic and our own strong refutations of what God is saying, to do what God desires, as Joseph did. Our task is to obediently and patiently, wait on the Holy Spirit, for His timing. Our job is to be where He wants us to be, when He calls our name, so that God will be glorified, and many will be amazed as Simeon and Anna did. I love you all. Amen.