

Christmas 2023

“The Story of Christmas-Part 4”

The Story Culminates With A Glorious Proclamation

A message by Pastor Phil Ballmaier

12/24/23

Find this weeks’ sermon audio and video message [HERE](#).

Three weeks ago, in honor of the Christmas season, we started a series which we’ve entitled “The Story of Christmas”.

The previous titles in this series are as follows:

- I. The Story Begins with a Promise
- II. The Story Continues with a Prophecy
- III. The Story Contains a Special Progeny

And that brings us to the fourth part of the Story of Christmas—

IV. The Story Culminates with a Glorious Proclamation

Before we look at that let’s set the stage by looking at the beginning of Luke 2—

Luke 2:1-2 (NKJV)

¹ And it came to pass in those days *that* a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. ² This census first took place while Quirinius was governing Syria.

A. The Political Background—verses 1-2

1. Caesar Augustus was emperor of Rome

Caesar Augustus was the grand-nephew and adopted son of Julius Caesar—He reigned from 27 BC to 14 AD. His real name was Gaius Octavius, and he took the name *Caesar* in honor of his adopted father Julius.

‘Augustus’ is actually not a name but a title meaning “*exalted one*.” The title had a religious connotation—it was an attempt on his part to *deify* himself. This was the beginning of the Roman Caesars’ claim that they were divine and not mere mortals.

2. Caesar Augustus ordered that the whole world should be registered

The Greek word for “**world**” is a reference to the *known* world of that day—or in other words, the Roman Empire.

Now understand that this census was not a *'one-time'* thing—but a decree that actually established a census-cycle that was to occur every 14 years (kind of like the American census which takes place every 10 years).

Caesar was a man who exercised near absolute authority over the whole Roman world—which allowed him to make such a decree—but what you need to understand is that while Caesar was on the throne—God was in charge!

God moved in the heart of Caesar Augustus to make this edict which forced Mary and Joseph to make the hundred-mile journey from Nazareth, where they were living, to Bethlehem—the place of Joseph's ancestry because he was a descendant of King David.

Look, nobody in their right mind would have undertaken a hundred-mile trip by foot over rough terrain with a wife who was that far along in her pregnancy if God had not ordained it—but why?

It was because the Word of God had to be fulfilled—you see seven hundred years earlier God had said through the prophet Micah—

Micah 5:2 (NKJV)

² "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."

When I read the prophecy of Micah it strikes me that this *'little man'* sitting on the throne in Rome thinking he was *"all that"*—the *"exalted one"* in charge of the whole world—was nothing more than a servant of God.

Proverbs 21:1 (NKJV)

¹ The king's heart *is* in the hand of the LORD, *Like* the rivers of water; He turns it wherever He wishes.

God had prophesied that the Christ-Child was to be born in Bethlehem—but He knew that Joseph and Mary would have never made the trip to Bethlehem voluntarily at this stage in her pregnancy. So, He taps Caesar on the shoulder and whispers in his ear—*"Why don't you take a census so you can tax the people?"*

Caesar pats himself on the back for having such a brilliant idea, he makes the decree, and the next thing you know—Mary and Joseph wind up in Bethlehem where Jesus needed to be born so that God's prophetic word could be fulfilled!

B. The People Involved—verses 3-8

1. Joseph and Mary

Luke 2:3-5 (NKJV)

³ So all went to be registered, everyone to his own city. ⁴ Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, ⁵ to be registered with Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with child.

The Jewish men living in Israel had been previously excluded from the Roman census, because Jews were exempt from serving in the Roman army, and the census was designed primarily to register young men for military service.

However, this new *universal* census was for the purpose of taxation so Ceasar wanted to number all the men in his kingdom by family and place of birth—which is why Joseph had to return to Bethlehem, his ancestral home, to register.

By this time Mary and Joseph were already legally married (betrothal/kiddushin) but they had purposed not to consummate the marriage until after Jesus was born—which is why she was called his “**betrothed wife.**”

2. The Christ-Child

Luke 2:6-7 (NKJV)

⁶ So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered. ⁷ And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

The word “**inn**” in verse 7 is the Greek word “*kataluma*” and wasn’t like the kind of inn we’re used to thinking of when we hear the word inn—like “Holiday Inn.” A *kataluma* was nothing more than a walled-in courtyard with no roof that was built around a well.

Coming off the walls about every 4ft. were dividers that formed a series of stalls all around the *kataluma*—which provided a little place where the traveler could get out of the wind and find safety from wild animals.

Travelers brought their own food—all that the innkeeper provided was fodder for the animals, water from the well, and fire for cooking. Bethlehem was so crowded with travelers who were no doubt traveling to their hometowns because of the census—that there was no room for Joseph and Mary in the inn.

By this time Mary had entered into labor and the only place for her to give birth was behind the *kataluma* in the stable that belonged to the owner of the inn.

Many scholars believe that our Lord was born in a cave where animals were sheltered and not in a wooden shed such as you see in modern manger scenes. And it was in this filthy place of animal dung, urine and rotting straw that Mary brought forth her “**firstborn**” son indicating that she had other sons after Jesus (Matthew 13:55).

Mary wrapped the Baby Jesus in long strips of cloth called “**swaddling cloths**” in order to keep His limbs straight and protected. The word translated “**manger**” most likely refers to a feeding trough made of stone and not of wood like our modern manger scenes depict.

I think the inn becomes a metaphor for the heart and life of so many today—

Someone has remarked,

“It seems that just like there wasn’t room for Jesus at the inn that seemed to start the pattern of Jesus’ life and ministry. We see that there was surely no room for Him within the religious system of the day—they were upset with Him. And throughout His life it seemed to be the story of His life—no room for Jesus. And unfortunately, it continues to be the story in many lives where people are unwilling to make room for the Savior.”

So, the people involved in the Story of Christmas are: Joseph and Mary, The Christ-Child, and;

3. The Shepherds

Luke 2:8 (NKJV)

⁸ Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.

Shepherds lived out in the fields keeping watch over their flocks from about May thru October — which means Jesus wasn't born on December 25. It is very significant to the story of Christmas that God chose to announce the birth of the Savior to a group of shepherds and not to the priests or scribes—or to any of the rulers of Israel.

To me the reason is clear—it was the Lord's way of demonstrating His grace toward mankind, for you see—shepherds were social outcasts in Israel. Their work not only made them ceremonially unclean—but it kept them away from the temple for months at a time so that they couldn't undergo ritual purification to be made clean.

They were notoriously immoral and dishonest—and no self-respecting person wanted anything to do with shepherds. This was God's way of telling us that Jesus didn't come to save "good" people—He came to save sinners.

Including those who are despised and rejected—the social outcasts of society that nobody wants to associate with.

The story of redemption (containing the birth of Jesus—the story of Christmas) is that God loves sinners—even the worst sinners, and outcasts of society—the people no one else wants a relationship with God wants to have a relationship with through His Son.

In fact, so much of the story of redemption will be the story of—'bad' people who went to heaven and 'good' people who went to hell.

A. The Political Background—verses 1-2

B. The People Involved—verses 3-8

C. The Proclamation of the Angel—verses 9-14

1. Good news for all mankind

Luke 2:9-12 (NKJV)

⁹ And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid. ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹² And this *will be* the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger."

Literally the angel said, "I announce to you good news, a great joy, which shall be to all the people (not just the Jewish people)."

This pronouncement of "good news" implied the presence of bad news. (Explain)

2. Peace on earth

Luke 2:13-14 (NKJV)

¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: ¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!"

In my mind verse 14 becomes the climax of the story of Christmas—a glorious proclamation sent from God to the human race that the Messiah had been born, a Savior had come (in fulfillment of His promise in Genesis 3:15) to bring ‘**peace on earth and goodwill toward men (mankind).**’

A song that is often sung at this time of the year is—“*I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day.*” That song was written by poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow on Christmas Day 1864. That Christmas season Longfellow found himself in a deep depression—you see not only was the Civil War raging but a year earlier his son had run away to join the Union army and had been severely wounded in battle.

On top that, Longfellow’s wife, Frances, had died in a fire three years earlier. In an effort to pull himself out of his depression he took to writing and wrote down these words:

*“I heard the bells on Christmas Day their old, familiar carols play,
And wild and sweet the words repeat of peace on earth, good-will to men!”*

As Longfellow stopped to reflect on all the conflict, suffering and death that war had brought to the nation—and how sorrow and tragedy had touched his own life, he wrote:

*“And in despair I bowed my head—there is no peace on earth,” I said,
“For hate is strong, and mocks the song of peace on earth, good-will to men!”*

But then finding strength in God and His Word—Longfellow ended with these words:

*“Then pealed the bells more loud and deep—God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;
The Wrong shall fail, the Right prevail, with peace on earth, good-will to men.”*

What helped bring Longfellow out of his depression?

It was reminding himself that, first of all, God was still on the throne and that no matter what he was going through personally God was still with him—He wasn’t dead or asleep on the job! But furthermore, Longfellow encouraged himself by remembering what God had promised in His Word—

Isaiah 9:6–7 (NIV)

⁶ For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. ⁷ Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.

God’s Word reminded Longfellow that someday He would right the wrongs in the world by punishing the wicked and establishing a Kingdom upon the earth of true peace and righteousness—a promise He began to fulfill with the birth of His Son.

Please understand that when the angel proclaimed—"**Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!**"—he wasn't talking about peace on earth between nations.

Jesus came the first time not to bring peace between man and his fellow man *politically*—He came the first time to bring peace between man and His God *spiritually*.

Look, when Jesus comes again at His Second Coming—He will save us from corrupt leaders, from war, injustice, oppression, hatred, violence and the prejudice of man toward his fellow man—in other words He will someday bring peace between individuals and nations—but first things first.

Before God can save a person from this present evil world system and allow them to live with Him in His glorious Kingdom someday—He first had to save them from their sins by dying for those sins and them receiving Him into their hearts by faith.

I have always thought it very sad, even tragic, that the time of the year we celebrate the birth of the Prince of Peace—the one time of the year that should characterize peace on earth in the heart, has become, for many, just the opposite.

Experts tell us that more people battle with depression and anxiety during the Christmas season than at any other time of the year—why is that? I think it's because Christmas is supposed to be the very embodiment of joy and happiness. People are bombarded with endless images of happy families laughing, singing Christmas carols, decorating trees, and gathered around a table enjoying a wonderful Christmas meal together.

Yet when they compare the sadness and emptiness, they are feeling with all the happiness and contentment everyone else seems to be experiencing—the result is they get depressed.

Christmastime is always a difficult time of the year for many. It could be that their marriage has just ended, which has produced feelings of sadness and of being alone. Many people are dealing with anxiety because they are out of work or are battling cancer or some other serious illness.

Then there is the over-abundance of families that are estranged from each other—children not talking to parents; parents not talking to their children; siblings not talking to each other—and the Christmas season only magnifies these problems and adds to their depression.

I know several families that have recently lost loved ones—how can anyone know peace or happiness when they are suffering from significant loss—especially at Christmastime!?

Evangelist and Pastor Greg Laurie put it well when he said—

"This [the birth of Christ] was a joyful day, and Christmas should be a joyful time. But not everyone feels that way—you might not be feeling a lot of joy today.

Maybe your family has unraveled or you have had a spouse leave you.

Maybe you have a lot of friction in the home, and it is not a happy place to be.

Maybe you are estranged from one of your children or your parents.

Maybe you have just gotten really bad news from the doctor. (Why does it always seem that bad news comes in December?)

Or maybe a loved one who was with you last year is no longer with you, and you feel deep sadness—when you watch other people having a good time, it actually makes it harder for you.

The happiest time of the year has actually become the saddest time of the year for you—here is the thing that

you and I need to know: We need to realize that the great hope and joy is not in Christmas—it is in Christ Himself—that is where the joy comes from.

Christmas cannot deliver on its promises. We get it so built up in our mind as though it is going to be the Second Coming or something.

But Christmas cannot bring harmony to your home. Christmas cannot bring peace on earth. Christmas cannot bring happiness—but Christ can do all of this and more. And when you get down to it—that is what we are longing for deep inside. Not Christmas, but Christ. Not merriment, but the Messiah. Not goodwill, but God...”

When my kids were little, we would spend Christmas Eve by my in-laws—usually getting home around midnight.

I was tired and had to be up early to get ready for our Christmas Day service—but before I could go to bed (actually, before my wife would let me go to bed!)—I had to put together the bike or the Little Tykes plastic kitchen—or whatever gift required assembly so that my children would find it waiting for them next to the tree “ready to go” on Christmas morning.

There were times, because I was so tired, that I felt I didn’t need to read the instructions—I could figure it out on my own. I reasoned that—if it said on the box a twelve-year-old could put the thing together—I figured, *If a twelve-year-old could do it with the instructions surely I who possessed a superior intellect—could do it without the instructions.*

The problem was that I would often wind up with “extra” parts (actually parts I left out) and the thing didn’t quite look like the picture on the box or work like the manufacturer designed it to.

It was then that I was forced to get the instructions out and meticulously follow the directions given by the manufacturer if I wanted this product to look and function the way it was designed to look and work by the one that created it in the first place!

As a pastor I have reflected on that over the years when I see people whose lives, marriages and families don’t look and function the way God, the Manufacturer, has designed them. The problem is they are trying to build their lives on their own according to how *they* think everything should fit together and work.

But they’re finding their lives aren’t working and so for many the answer is, not to get out the Manufacturer’s Instruction Manual, the Bible, and start over—no, instead they feel frustrated and hopeless, so they turn to alcohol and/or drugs for help.

Look, no substance will help a person ‘fix’ their problems, it just makes things worse—and often much worse!

An article that came out recently in a national publication said that more Americans are dying from substance abuse (alcohol and drugs) than ever before in America—and that suicides are way up especially, among young people.

All of this testifies to the fact that more people than ever before in our country are feeling hopeless because their lives aren’t ‘working’—and they don’t know how to fix them. You see they’ve left a very important “part” out—the most important *Part* to any life without which a life will not work—and that *Part* is God Himself in the Person of Jesus Christ.

That’s why Jesus came to the earth 2000 years ago—to save us from our sins—YES, but also to save us from ourselves—to save us from self-destruction! **Jesus came to earth on a ‘search and rescue mission’—to seek and to save those who are lost.**

You see, without Him in your life—your life won’t work the way God has designed it to work!

You will have no joy, no peace and no purpose for why you're here on this earth without Jesus in your heart and life—He is the missing *piece* in so many lives.

We celebrate Christmas by giving gifts to one another—but we often forget it is actually the time we should celebrate the greatest Gift God has ever given to us. **The greatest gift God has ever given to the human race is the gift of His Son—a Gift you must receive before He can benefit you.**

May this Christmas be a time when you receive Jesus as your Savior into your heart and find the missing Piece to your life!

Merry Christmas!

If you would like to know more about what it means to be a Jesus-follower— ***you can experience the richest Christmas of your life!***

Please, reach out to us. It would be our greatest privilege to lead you into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ.

Reach out to us [here](#).

Want to know more? Click [here](#).