

Can We Believe The Christmas Story?

For me, growing up, what was most meaningful about the Christmas season was the mood: the colorful decorations, songs, the smells of Christmas dinner, the festive, warm cheerfulness of the season. There's nothing wrong with all of that as far as it goes, but in the coming weeks, we want to talk about something that goes farther – reaches down deeper into the heart of things and of us. It's something I didn't value until, as a young man, I first saw the truth about Jesus Christ and, turning to him, trusted in him. In these upcoming weeks, we are going to focus on the *truth* of the Christmas story. We hope to do so in a way that's not only interesting intellectually but also enriching and encouraging spiritually.

It's important that we do this. Contemporary culture places a huge premium on personal feelings and perceptions. The pervasive message in our culture is that what matters most is just whatever matters to you inwardly, following your heart. The Bible's message is different. As personally moving as the Christmas season can be with its pageantry and beauty and the decorations and traditions that are so meaningful to so many of us, the fundamental message of Christmas is that something tremendous, unexpected, beautiful, and powerful has happened in human history. It is truly summed up in that most famous of Scriptures, **John 3:16** which says, *“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”* Our changeable feelings could never be an adequate measure of the truth or power of Christmas. The Christmas story when believed changes the whole way you look at the world - the entire course of the life you live - can change not only your here and now but your hereafter and your eternal destiny and because of *all that* -- it can change any mood when deeply believed. The Christian claim is that this message, and the story behind it, is not just beautiful but historical. It can hold up to the scrutiny of skeptics, give hope to the hurting, and lift up the most wounded and flawed among us.

But the first thing we have to take seriously is that...

I. THE TRUE STORY OF CHRISTMAS IS THE STORY WE FIND IN THE SCRIPTURE.

In **Luke 1:1-4**, Luke says he followed things closely and leaned on eyewitnesses so that, **verse 4**, "*you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.*" The implication is even in the early days of the faith there were some things you might hear about the life of Jesus about which you could not be certain. That's important.

A. The true story of Jesus is not the children's pageant or pop-culture version of the story but the one that's actually found in the Bible itself.

A typical, popular, version of the Christmas story goes like this:

It's about 2000 years ago. On December 25. Mary rides into Bethlehem on a donkey, urgently needing to deliver her baby. Although it's an emergency, all the innkeepers turn them away. So they deliver baby Jesus in a stable. Angels show up and sing to the shepherds. Afterward, three kings arrive on camels as they gather around the manger to worship the quiet newborn.

That story has been told so many times people assume it is found in Scripture. Then what can happen is someone is challenged on some detail in that story so they go to look it up in the Bible and they can't find it. They begin to wonder what else I have been taught that isn't even in the Bible.

Let's ask seven questions to help us work through this.

1st Did Mary ride a donkey to Bethlehem? Have any of you ever been pregnant? Well, I know some of you have. Have any of you ever ridden a donkey? Have any of you who've ever been pregnant spent the last 48 hours of your pregnancy on a 70 to 80-mile donkey ride? If so, I'd love to hear your story. It's pretty special. It's not a story you will find even in the Bible. What does the Bible say? It simply says Mary came with Joseph to Bethlehem. We don't know how they traveled.

2nd Did they arrive in Bethlehem the night she gave birth? The Bible doesn't say that. It just says Jesus was born while they were in Bethlehem. They could have been there for days.

3rd Did they have a conversation with an innkeeper? There is no mention of an innkeeper in Holy Scripture. The word for "inn" can also be translated "guest room." It's the same word used to describe the upper room where the Last Supper was shared. It may have been an

inn, but it might have been an attached room at the home of a friend or family member. We don't know.

4th Was Jesus born in a stable? Luke 2:7 says Mary gave birth to her firstborn Son and laid him in a manger, *because* there was no place for them in the inn. We know from archeology that homes often had attached rooms. We also know that they often had connected areas to accommodate livestock - family animals. A manger is a little trough or structure to hold food for animals. They used a manger as a crib for the newborn Jesus, but that's all we know. We really do not know the details, so *stable* could be misleading.

5th. Did the angels come and sing to the Shepherds? They came and spoke - we don't know if they sang. Scripture doesn't say.

6th. Did three kings come riding on camels when Jesus was born? The Bible doesn't mention kings or camels. It says wise men or magi came. These were high-ranking political and religious advisors for the Persian empire. Considering the rank that they held and the distance they would have had to travel, they probably would have come in a caravan with an escort of soldiers. And I read once that they would have more likely had been riding Arabian horses than lumbering along on camels. They brought three gifts, but we don't know how many magi came. They did not come the night that Jesus was born but sometime later. The visit of the shepherds and the Magi were separate events. That's important. If we try to place them at the same time, the details don't harmonize, and this is thrown up as a contradiction in the story. There is no contradiction if we stick to Scripture.

7th. Was Jesus born on December 25? The Bible does not date the birth of Jesus. The bottom line is the Bible doesn't say. It doesn't matter. I'm happy to celebrate the birth of Jesus on December 25. The point is not that we can't have some traditions that are part of our celebration of the birth of Christ, but we do need to know the difference between our traditions and the story in Scripture.

Not long ago, the Organization for American Atheists paid for a billboard. It shows three wise men on camels approaching a nativity scene with the baby Jesus in the manger. The billboard says: "You KNOW it's a myth, this season celebrate REASON." It's ironic, isn't it? The scene they show actually *is* a myth: three wise men on camels at the manger. That's not in Scripture. We shouldn't be shaken when the issues questioned are not crucial to the story. We should know the

difference between the story in Scripture and the popular versions on Christmas cards and in Christmas pageants.

The true story of Christmas is the one we find in Scripture. Now, if we flip that, the other side of it is equally important.

II. THE STORY WE FIND IN THE SCRIPTURE IS THE TRUE STORY OF THE BIRTH OF JESUS.

Look at Luke 1:2-3:

First of all, he says, “There were eyewitnesses.” Luke is not *just* talking about the birth of Jesus but the life of Jesus. There were thousands of people who witnessed his life, both friends and enemies.

Second, they delivered what they witnessed to us. The word *delivered* in **verse 2**, is the Greek word *paradosis*, which was a technical term for receiving something important and passing it on to others to preserve it without embellishing it or changing it.

Third, Luke says, “I carefully put together an orderly account.” **Verse 4** adds *that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.*

A. The Scriptural story of the birth of Jesus is found in two independent Biblical accounts that complement each other.

One is found in **Luke 1-2** and the other in **Matthew 1-2**. Sometimes critics of the Christian faith will say it's *only* found in two of the gospels. But the fact is to have a birth narrative in *two* independent, non-identical sources that complement and to each other is remarkable in ancient history. Sometimes critics of the Christian faith will say, “Well there are contradictions in the two stories,” but all of the so-called contradictions have repeatedly been shown to be non-existent. Speaking about the two accounts of the birth of Jesus, celebrity atheist and author Richard Dawkins said the ‘*contradictions are glaring, but consistently overlooked by the faithful*’. *Let’s not overlook them.*

Let's look at what are claimed to be contradictions.

Where did Joseph and Mary live? Dawkins claims that Matthew has ‘*Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem all along*’. Luke says that *Mary and Joseph lived in Nazareth before Jesus was born*. He claims this is a contradiction. *But look at what the verses actually say.*

Matthew 2;1-2 says, *Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east*

came to Jerusalem, 2 saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?"

Luke 2:4-6 And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth to 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, who was with child. 6 And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth.

What would be a contradiction? If Luke said Mary's fiancée was named Joseph and Matthew said he was named *Alexandro*, that would be a contradiction. If Matthew really did say they had been living in Bethlehem *all along*, that would be a contradiction, but he doesn't say that. They both agree Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Luke adds that they *had been* living up in Nazareth *before* the birth. The two accounts complement each other. They do not contradict each other. They each add details to the true story of the birth of Jesus.

It's deeply disturbing when prejudiced opponents of the Christian faith try to torpedo the faith everyday people could have in the message of scripture, with accusations about glaring contradictions that are as dogmatically asserted as they are absolutely unwarranted. And it's sad for people who go on stringing the lights on their Christmas tree and trying to enjoy the fleeting festivities of the season while missing out on the underlying but truly glorious reality of the Christmas message.

B. The story of the birth of Jesus is not just a fantasy to move us emotionally. It is the story of an act of God that took place in history and changes everything.

Pretty much every Christmas since the book *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* was published, I mention the book and it's author Dr. Richard Bauckham, a professor at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland. That book, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* gives multiple reasons why the Biblical claim to eyewitness testimony delivering the true story of Jesus is compelling. Doctor Bauckham ultimately comes to this conclusion as a scholar and a historian: *If you want to know the true story of Jesus, read the gospels as historically reliable.* The only reason to dismiss the gospels as historically reliable is because of a prior refusal to accept the possibility of the miraculous. But that puts you in a bind intellectually, because the whole Christmas story is about God invading our world personally in Jesus. And if that happened, you would only expect the miraculous to be part of that story.

Ultimately

C. The true story of Christmas is vindicated and validated by the larger story of Jesus.

Look again at Luke 1:1

1. In verse 1, Luke speaks of the things that have been accomplished among us. That is an interesting choice of words. You might expect him to have just said the things that happened among us. The Greek word also means “*fulfilled*” and points to the truth that the birth of Jesus and his life fulfilled ancient prophecies. (Barry is going to talk about that next week.) We know there were prophecies given hundreds of years before the birth of Jesus. The Dead Sea Scrolls prove they were written long before the birth of Jesus. They weren't just random predictions but a unified hope, a set of promises that created a deep longing for the coming of a Savior and included many particular predictions that the true Savior would have to fulfill. They included the circumstances and place of his birth, as well as many aspects of his life and character, including his suffering for us to pay for our sins and his ultimate victory in the resurrection.

2. Jesus has been and remains the most influential person to have ever lived. Everything we are told in the gospels about Jesus is confirmed by the survival and ongoing power of the gospels through thousands of years of questioning by scholars and skeptics. The prophecies fulfilled in his life, the eyewitness testimony to the miracles that followed him, his awesome love for people, his brutal and yet beautifully sacrificial death, his resurrection, his impact on the skeptical disciples who witnessed his resurrection and through them, his profound influence on the whole world are all a reflection of and evidence for the reality that in Jesus, God came down to earth for us.

3. The Christmas story - because it is true - sheds its light on all our stories. In his terrible book, *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins, comes to this conclusion about a world without God. He says “... *there is at the bottom no design, no purpose, no evil, and no good. Nothing but blind, pitiless indifference.*” I admire the consistency he shows in facing the logical conclusion of his unbelief - that if there is no God, there is only meaningless, and pitiless indifference. But it's sad. And it's not your story or mine, not really.

The true story of Christmas is like the dawning of a new day that drives that kind of darkness away and floods the world with light. It assures us

there is a God at the heart of the universe, and while there may be many things mysterious in what he allows in the world, the suffering and the evil we see and experience... we can know that he cares because he came into our world and became one of us in Jesus.

Conclusion

Some of my favorite preachers are British. I hope that if that is not already true for you, it will be soon! One of them, Dick Lucas, tells how he read an essay in which a man said he would believe in God if anyone could present him with a watertight argument that irrefutably proved the reality of God. And Dick Lucas said, *"I don't think God has given us a watertight argument, although I know some disagree with me, what God has provided you and me is a watertight person. Jesus Christ is the watertight person against whom, in the end, there can be no argument."* One day, all the mysteries will be resolved, and God will show that he can bring victory out of what looks like defeat. He can bring goodness out of what looks like evil. Every mouth will be stopped, and every voice will say, with the angels *Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased.* The whole story of Jesus from the cradle to the cross to the empty tomb, and the ascension into heaven bears witness to that.

Christmas is the true story of how God, in love, did the humanly incomprehensible in real history. God the Son, without ceasing to be God, became fully human and lived as one of us. He lived his life for us and died on the cross to pay for our sins so that, throughout the ages, when anyone turns to him and trusts in him, He saves them and comes to live in them and with them. *Immanuel*, God with us. If we believe in the true story of Jesus, we have an incredible cause to be cheerful, joyful, loving, and full of hope every day, in every season, all the time. **John 3:16** is the true story of Jesus. *"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."* Believe it.

Amen

A Prayer Expressing Faith in Christ

Heavenly Father, Thank you for breaking into human history in the most compassionate and compelling manner. We thank you for sending your Son into our world to become one of us and, as the angel told Mary, to save us from our sins. I know deeply that I need your saving grace. I turn entirely to Christ and place my trust in him as my Incarnate, crucified, risen and victorious Savior and Lord. Thank you for forgiveness, for your presence, and for your promises of eternal life. In Jesus name Amen.

A Prayer for Spiritual Renewal

Heavenly Father, I praise and thank you for sending Christ into the world to reveal your holy love and redeem people like me. May I see every chapter in my life story in light of the greater story you have revealed in scripture. May your gift of grace in the birth, life, sacrifice, and resurrection of Jesus touch and transform every aspect of my life and my story every day now and forever more. Amen