

Songs of Christmas Series – Part 3

What Child Is This?

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*Welcome/ Intro: This morning we are going to look at the Christmas Carol called, “**What Child Is This?**” I really like the fact that the title of the song has a question in it. I believe that if you title anything that you write with a question. It would imply that the author is going to at least attempt to answer the question in his/her writings.*

As I studied a little the history of this song I discovered some interesting twists and turns that surround the song’s creation, therefore I titled this message “Really Bad turns to Really Good or Bittersweet” or “It was the best of times it was the worst of times” from “The tale of two Cities” Charles Dickens.

I am going to briefly outline how I am going to deliver this message, so you can follow:

1. Review some Facts and History of the song.
2. Dig into the song verse by verse...we will be looking at 1871 version/ full version.
3. Discover the bible verses that the song is based.
4. Develop our own answers to song’s question... “What Child Is This?”

Some Interesting Facts and History...The back story

The author was William Chatterton Dix born in Bristol, England in 1837. He worked as a manager for an insurance company. He had a passion for poetry. He was afflicted by an unexpected and severe illness that resulted in him being bedridden and suffering from severe depression. This experience led him to read the bible/Christian books born-again...inspired to write and one of the things he wrote was called, “The Manger Throne” which later had music added to it and was called, “What Child Is This?” The melody was borrowed from a popular song called Greensleeves which was mentioned in one of Shakespeare’s plays which dates it around 1640.

Therefore, you might say that from his suffering there came a joy or redemption. I have heard people say today and I have taught this idea that in the Kingdom there is no needless pain. Remember the title *Really bad turns to really good*. Another interesting fact is that in the era while Dix was writing, Christmas was not the celebration it is today. In conservative Christian churches gift-giving, decorating, or even acknowledging the day was forbidden. These Early Puritan groups feared that if set aside as a special day, Christmas would become a day of pagan rituals more than a very serious time of worship. In this context, it was unusual for Dix to feel moved to write about Christ’s birth, since many writers of the period ignored Christmas altogether.

Listen as we play the song.

Song Verse by Verse (1871 version)

Verse 1a asks a rhetorical question. **“What Child Is This?”** Remember that later in Jesus’ life he asks a similar question to his followers, “who do men say that I am?” The answer that you give to this question is a game changer. Your life will be led by how you really answer this, or better said, how your heart and actions answer this question.

Verse 1b which states “This this is Christ the King” (Chorus) is William Dix’s answer to this rhetorical question. The question that still remains for us today is how do you, or how will you answer this question?

Verse 2a also states a rhetorical question, **“Why lies he in such mean estate?”** The phrase “mean estate” literally means poor location. In other words, why was Jesus the Lord of everything born in a feeding trough for cows in a cave?

Mr. Dix also tried to answer this question in verse 2b, which states, **“Nails, spear shall pierce Him through, the cross be borne for me, for you. Hail, hail the Word made flesh, The Babe, the Son of Mary.”**

As I looked at that line in the song it doesn’t seem to fully answer the question for me. So, has I prayed and researched I came up with this answer. Jesus was born poor, so he could relate to us. Think about it this way...If someone who is wealthy and powerful tells you to not worry about your finances or your position in life, you may be thinking that they cannot understand having needs because they seem not to have any. But if someone who is poor seems content and tells you that God will take good care of you like He has done for them, it seems more believable.

Also, the fact is that it is hard to relate to a God who can do everything and created everything and knows everything. But a baby in a manger born to a normal family with normal needs. That we can more readily relate to. God has gone too great lengths to make himself relatable. In other words, to allow us to understand him and touch him. That is how great our God is.

2 Corinthians 8:9 For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.

Lastly, Jesus the very best turn-around story in History...born poor to a normal family, grew up as a carpenter, died on a criminal’s cross after only 3 years of ministry, changed the world. Who does not love that?!!

When you have answered these two questions, the one of what? verse 1 and the other of why? Verse 2 you should be moved to do something as a response.

Verses 3 encourages a response. **“So bring Him incense, gold and myrrh, Come Peasant, King to own Him The King of Kings salvation brings, Let loving hearts enthrone Him.”**

When we consider the verses of this song I believe as many historians also do that they lead us to Luke 2:8-20. Many say that Mr. Dix was pondering how he thought that the shepherds may have thought or felt after hearing the angels and seeing the baby. Since that is the case, let’s

spend some time looking at those verses and ponder ourselves what we might have been thinking if we were one of the shepherds.

Remember as we look at these verses we are trying to answer the question, "What Child Is This?" We are going to look closely at the angel's announcement since I believe that there are several clues to help us answer the question "What Child Is This?" contained in it.

1) First clue is in who the birth announcement came to. Shepherds

Luke 2:8 "And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night".

Let's review some facts about shepherds:

1. They were considered a low class of people.
2. Tight knit community.
3. Because of their daily contact with blood, they were considered unclean.
4. The isolation of the job made it the least desirable job for a family man but a perfect job for those who were running from something.

Therefore, it was amazing that God chose the lowly shepherds to be the first visitors of His son and therefore the first to share the story of His birth.

Why the shepherds?

- A. I believe the choosing of the shepherds shows God's love for all mankind.
- B. This foreshadowed Jesus' role as the Good Shepherd.
- C. God despises our smugness, prejudice, and pride.

In summary: The message of Jesus' birth came to shepherds. By doing this God was beginning Jesus' life with a loud and crystal-clear statement of what His life's mission was going to be. And that of course was to seek and save that which was lost.

2) Second clue is in how his birth announcement came. Multitude of Angels

Luke 2: 9-14 An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests."

As we read the story of the shepherds we see that they seem to be having a routine night. Doing what they were called to do. No special night. No special prayer meeting. Just another boring night watching sheep. But God had a different plan. Their night was interrupted by an angel. The shepherds were surprised at this announcement and afraid of the messenger. The bible actually states that the shepherds were terrified.

The Greek word used for terrified means that they were very much frightened. King James version calls it sore afraid. Sore means very much or exceedingly.

Let's just say that God got their attention. Then the angel tells them, "Do not be afraid" O well, too late for that. Maybe the angel should have said that you do not need to continue to be in fear. But actually, the angel's statement was a very common biblical phrase. The NIV bible uses the phrase, "Do not be afraid" 65 times.

It was spoken to Abraham, Moses, Joshua, Gideon, Elijah, Hezekiah, Solomon, Jehoshaphat, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Joseph, crowds around Jesus, woman at the tomb, Zechariah, Mary, the disciples, Paul, and John.

The phrase was almost always used to encourage the recipient to trust the Lord to help them through a situation or assignment that was bigger than they could possibly do on their own. The shepherd's assignment was to be the first evangelists. The shepherds were all very much awake and ready to listen after they were jolted into reality by their messengers. The message was simply far too important to sleep through. Of Course, how the announcement is given is even less important than the "what" of the announcement. Listen to the message the angel delivers.

Luke 2:10-11 (NIV) "I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord."

That is great, but what the angel didn't say was that after 400 years of silence God was now speaking very loudly, hundreds of Old Testament prophetic scriptures are being fulfilled. The redemption of mankind is at hand. The savior of the world has been born. The world will never be the same. That was hidden within the angel's message. This Child is, amazing, one of a kind, miraculous, son of God, ultimate deliverer. It seems to me the how and what of the announcement made it clear what child this was going to be.

3) Third clue is in what the announcement accomplished. A bold witness

Luke 2:15-20 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

In these verses, we see the three reactions of the Shepherds.

1. They responded. The scriptures say they talked to each other and said let us go to Bethlehem and see this thing that the Lord has told us. They recognized that it was the Lord speaking through the angels and they responded immediately. That sounds simple enough, but how many times have you heard from the Lord and not responded?

2. They searched for him. No giving up. Versus 16 simply says that they found Him. That is an understatement. I imagine they searched high and low in a very full city and many mangers. No star in the East. That was the Wise man about 2 years later.

3. They spread the word. In verse 17 of Luke 2 the bible states that they spread the word that was told to them. Amazing... quiet shepherds without much education and very little voice now speaking to everyone. That made people notice.

I believe that due to the shepherds' response it seems clear to me that without a doubt they believed that the babe in the manger was the long-awaited Messiah, the son of God, the Savior of the world. The question that still remains for you and me is,

“What Child Is This? Who is this Jesus?

Who is He to you when you are in need of healing?

Who is He to you when you need a financial breakthrough?

Who is He to you when you are lonely and need a friend?

Who is He to you when all things are good and the sun seems to be shining on everything you do?

Who is He to you when you are in need of forgiveness or you need to extend some?

In closing we are going to be singing the song, “What Child Is This?” and as we are singing, the prayer ministers are ready to your left.

Let's stand together and sing

Prayer: