

## CHRISTMAS IS THE BEST TIME OF THE YEAR!

Luke 2:8-14

What time is Christmas? The Bible says that everything that happens in the world happens exactly in the timing that God chooses. Christmas is on December 25th because early Christians linked Jesus' birth to the winter solstice, possibly to counter the pagan Roman festivals like Saturnalia and Sol Invictus, or through calculations placing Jesus' conception on March 25 (the Annunciation), with December 25 being nine months later, though the Bible doesn't give a specific date, and scholars debate the exact historical timing. The date became widely adopted by the 4th century. December 25 appears in writings as Christmas by figures like Hippolytus (3rd century) and John Chrysostom. The Early Church fathers, who were students of the Apostles wanted to celebrate the birth of Jesus during the darkest parts of the year to show Jesus is the true light of the world.

Scientists tell us that for those of us who live north of the equator, the longest night of the year is December 21 - the winter solstice. But any kid knows that the longest night of the year is not December 21st. It's three days later, on Christmas Eve. Anyone remember as a kid, waking your parents up six or seven times a night on Christmas Eve saying, "Is it Christmas time yet?"

The Bible says that God specifically chose the time when Jesus Christ would come to earth. It was not an accident. In history, He specifically chose that time as the time for Jesus' birth.

*"When the right time came, the time God decided on, He sent His son, born of a woman so that He could adopt us as His very own children."* Galatians 4:4-5

It might have seemed like the right time, but for those who had been waiting thousands of years, it must have seemed God was running pretty late. The time between the last writings of the Old Testament and the appearance of Christ is known as the "intertestamental" (or "between the testaments") period. It lasted from the prophet Malachi's time (about 400 BC) to the preaching of John the Baptist (about AD 25). Because there was no prophetic word from God during the period from Malachi to John, some refer to it as the "400 silent years." The political, religious, and social atmosphere of Israel changed significantly during this period. Much of what happened was predicted by the prophet Daniel. (Daniel chapters 2, 7, 8, and 11 and compare to historical events.)

Israel was under the control of the Persian Empire about 539–332 BC. The Persians allowed the Jews to practice their religion with little interference. They were even allowed to rebuild and worship at the temple (2 Chronicles 36:22–23; Ezra 1:1–4). This span of time included the last 100 years of the Old Testament period and about the first 100 years of the intertestamental period. This time of relative peace and contentment was just the calm before the storm.

During the intertestamental period, The Persian Empire started expanding its territory and got a little too close to the Greeks. Alexander the Great defeated Darius of Persia in 330 BC, bringing Greek rule to the world. He conquered the known world in 12 years. Alexander was a student of Aristotle and was well-educated in Greek philosophy and politics. Alexander required that Greek culture be promoted in every land that he conquered. For the first time since the tower of Babel everyone spoke the same language. No matter where you lived you spoke a little Greek. The Bible was written into a language everyone could read. As a result, the Hebrew Old Testament was translated into Greek in 280 BC, becoming the translation known as the Septuagint. Most of the New Testament references to Old Testament Scripture use the Septuagint phrasing. Alexander did allow religious freedom for the Jews, though he still strongly promoted Greek lifestyles. This was not a good turn of events for Israel, since the Greek culture was very worldly, humanistic, and ungodly.

After Alexander died, Judea was ruled by a series of successors, culminating in the Selucid king Antiochus Epiphanes. Antiochus did far more than refuse religious freedom to the Jews. Around 167 BC, he overthrew the rightful line of the priesthood and desecrated the temple, defiling it with unclean animals and a pagan altar

(Mark 13:14). Eventually, Jewish resistance to Antiochus, led by Judas Maccabeus and the Hasmoneans, restored the rightful priests and rescued the temple. The period of the Maccabean Revolt was one of war, violence, and infighting.

Around 63 BC, Pompey of Rome conquered The Greeks putting Israel and all of Judea under control of the Caesars. They ruled with an iron fist. They exploited the Jewish people and violently put down all opposition. Because of this abuse the Jewish people were dispersed throughout the Roman Empire. If this had not happened the gospels would have a hard time getting out of Israel. This eventually led to Herod being made king of Judea by the Roman emperor and senate. This is the nation that taxed and controlled the Jews and eventually executed the Messiah on a Roman cross. Roman, Greek, and Hebrew cultures were now mixed together in Judea. The Romans established a series of roads for travel and instituted a highways patrol of guards.

The events of the intertestamental period set the stage for Christ and had a profound impact on the Jewish people. Both Jews and pagans from other nations were becoming dissatisfied with religion. The pagans were beginning to question the validity of polytheism. Romans and Greeks were drawn from their mythologies toward the Hebrew Scriptures, now easily accessible in Greek or Latin. The Jews, however, were despondent. Once again, they were conquered, oppressed, and polluted. Hope was running low; faith was even lower. They were convinced that now the only thing that could save them and their faith was the appearance of the Messiah. Not only were people primed and ready for the Messiah, but God was moving in other ways as well: the Romans had built roads (to aid the spread of the gospel); everyone understood a common language, Koine Greek (the language of the New Testament); and there was a fair amount of peace and freedom to travel (further aiding the dissemination of the gospel).

Historically, politically, culturally, philosophically, and linguistically everything had been orchestrated the circumstances so that as many people as possible could learn that the savior had been born so the good news of the gospel could be spread.

The New Testament tells the story of how hope came, not only for the Jews but for the entire world. Christ's fulfillment of prophecy was anticipated and recognized by many who sought Him out. The stories of the Roman centurion, the wise men, and the Pharisee Nicodemus show how Jesus was recognized as the Messiah by those from several different cultures. The "400 years of silence" of the intertestamental period were broken by the greatest story ever told—the gospel of Jesus Christ!

## 1. CHRISTMAS IS THE BEST TIME TO LET GO OF OUR FEARS.

*"Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people."* Luke 2:10

What are you worried about? The economy? Your health? Bills? Your kids? What are you worried about? The first thing the angel says is this: "Don't be afraid! Release your anxiety. Let go of your fear."

*"And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. 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 that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, 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 heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.'"* Luke 2:8-14

- Do Not Fear Because Fear Is Destructive.

There are 365 "Fear not's" in the Bible. God knows that we struggle with fear. The Gospel Is Good News Because It Banishes Fear.

- Do Not Fear Because You Are Important To God.

*“Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.”* Luke 2:11

No matter how insignificant you may think you are, God knows you, and you are important to Him.

*“Be strong and of a good courage, fear not, nor be afraid of them: for the LORD your God, he it is that does go with you; he will not fail you, or forsake you.”* Deuteronomy 31:6

*“The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?”* Psalm 27:1

*“The LORD is on my side; I will not fear: what can man do unto me?”* Psalm 118:6

*“The fear of man brings a snare, but whoever puts his trust in the LORD shall be safe.”* Proverbs 29:25

*“Fear not; for I am with you, do not be dismayed, for I am your God: I will strengthen you; yes, I will help you; yes, I will uphold you with the right hand of my righteousness.”* Isaiah 41:10

## 2. CHRISTMAS IS TIME TO GIVE AND SHARE.

*“I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people.”* Luke 2:10

Jesus’ arrival was not going to be heralded as an elitist arrival. He was going to be for everybody, even for shepherds. The Christmas narrative is that it's not just shepherds because then you might think that Jesus Christ was only for the down-and-outers, for the outcasts, and for those who were born on the wrong side of the tracks. Pretty soon, guess who shows up—the rich folks, the wise men, bringing great wealth and gifts. Interestingly enough, they weren't Jewish. They were Gentiles. The Christmas narratives prove this point: Jesus would be an all-people Savior.

*“I bring you (give or share with you) the most joyful news ever announced, and it is for everyone!”* Luke 2:10

- You matter to God.
- You are not an accident.
- God wants you to know Him as much as He knows you.

Jesus came to earth so we can know what He's like. He brings us Good News. God wants you to know Him. God's gift to you is personal. He's like Hallmark Cards: He cared enough to send the best. He didn't send an angel. He came Himself.

Jesus is most respected because He gave. He was generous. Jesus always gave more than He took. Jesus’ life is summed up in this: “I have come to give, not take.”

*“He who gives generously to the needy and shows kindness will be powerful and respected.”* Psalm 112:9

The goal of life is not to have less, but to give more. Gratefulness will lead you to generosity.

John Bunyon said, "You have not lived today until you have done something for someone who can never repay you."

### 3. CHRISTMAS IS A TIME TO EXPERIENCE FORGIVENESS.

*"Today, in the town of David, a Savior has been born for you; he is Christ the Lord!"* Luke 2:11

God didn't send us a salesman because we didn't need a product. And He didn't send us a politician, because we didn't need diplomacy. He didn't send us a soldier, because we didn't need a war fought. And He didn't send a scientist because we didn't need information. But He sent us a Savior, because you need a Savior, and I do too. If you didn't need a Savior, God wouldn't have wasted time sending one. If you need a Savior, He's going to send it. God sent a Savior so we could receive forgiveness.

Why do I need a Savior? The Bible says that heaven is a perfect place. There's no sin in heaven, there's no suffering in heaven, there's no pain in heaven, and there's no sorrow in heaven. It is a perfect place. The Bible says only perfect people get to live there. Obviously, if imperfect people lived there, it wouldn't be perfect. That means I don't stand a chance of getting to heaven on my own merit, and you don't either.

You may be a good person, but it doesn't say good people go to heaven. It says perfect people go to heaven. Not imperfect... perfect. And none of us measure up. You may be Mother Teresa but you're still not perfect. God doesn't grade on a curve.

So we all have a big problem. Here's this perfect place, and none of us are perfect. So God creates Plan B and comes to earth in the form of Jesus who was perfect and says, "You can get to heaven on My ticket." That sounds like a good idea. I can't get to heaven on my own ticket. It's not good enough. But God says, "I will be your Savior."

How do I let Christ save me? It's real simple. You admit you need a Savior. That's hard for a lot of us because it hurts our pride. We think we're a good person, and that may be true, but you're not good enough. You're not perfect. It's admitting to God, "I need a Savior. I need help." That's how you make him your Savior. Admitting you need help.

God can't save you until you stop trying to save yourself. You can't have Christ as your Savior until you quit trying to get to heaven on your own effort. You just relax and say, "I don't deserve to be forgiven. I just cast myself on Your mercy." And God says, "That's what I've been waiting for. You're forgiven." It's just grace.

The problem is, we don't realize how desperately we need a Savior. You'll never earn it, you'll never deserve it. It's just a gift. That's the Good News.

Jesus said, *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him."* John 3:16-17

Not to condemn, but to save. Jesus came to resolve your guilt. He didn't come to condemn you, but to change you. He didn't come to scare you, but to save you.

One of the biggest problems in our society today is how people need to learn how to get rid of guilt. Turn on talk radio. The answers psychologists give are answers like, "Just learn to live with your guilt." That's no help at all. The problem is they don't have the power to forgive. Only God does, and only God can give me that clear conscious.

In an old Colombo rerun with Johnny Cash as the bad guy, in the closing line, when he finally gets caught, he says, "I'm glad I got caught because the guilt was killing me." You know what I'm talking about if you've ever had regrets.

God says, "I came to give you forgiveness." So at Christmas it's time to receive forgiveness. That's the Good News. Christ says, "I didn't come to condemn but to save."

#### 4. CHRISTMAS IS A TIME TO RECEIVE PEACE.

*"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men."* Luke 2:14

God wants you to not only have peace with Him, but He wants you to have peace with other people too. The reality of the world we live in is very complex. Our own world involves rent and friends and children and work. This quest, this plea for peace? It can really happen in the midst of our everyday lives.

Peace is one of those things that everyone wants, but no one has a real clear answer of what it is or how you can get it and keep it. I like to look in the dictionary whenever I have a word that I need a clear understanding of. Webster's dictionary has this to say about peace: it is the "freedom from or stopping of war; freedom from public disturbance or disorder; freedom from disagreement or quarrels, harmony, concord; an undisturbed state of mind, absence of mental conflict; calm, quiet, tranquility."

Someone has said, "Peace is that calm of mind that is not ruffled by adversity, overclouded by a remorseful conscience, or disturbed by fear."

If you believe the internet, peace of mind is big business in America. Everybody thinks they have the key to it. I typed in the phrase "peace of mind" and it was interesting to see what the top ten responses were on the internet.

Number one was Peace of Mind products which sells survival food.

Number two was the Peace of Mind home security system.

Number three was Peace of Mind funeral services.

Number four was a raga band called Peace of Mind.

Number five was Peace of Mind candles, crystals and body soaps.

Number six was a company selling cancer insurance.

Number seven is a company that sells home inspections that takes the guesswork out of buying a home.

Number eight was a plumbing warranty plan that insures your toilet. (I know you've all been very anxious about that!)

Number nine was Peace of Mind Hypnosis Therapy Clinic.

Number ten was Peace of Mind Baptist Church in Texas.

Everybody thinks they have the key to peace of mind, or at least wants you to think so, so you'll buy their product. There's an ad for a perfume called Peace perfume. The title said, "Wear it to feel serenity." If it were all that easy, it would be great – just put a little perfume on, and you'll have peace of mind.

Peace of mind is such an important concept in life that people will do almost anything to find it. They will travel to exotic places at great expense. They will sniff a brain-destroying drug up their nose. They will experiment with New Age rituals. They will try all kinds of things.

But the truth is, very few people in this world are at peace with themselves. Most people carry a high degree of stress, anxiety, or tension in their lives.

Three things that rob the peace of mind that God intends for us to have.

- When circumstances are uncontrollable, we lose our peace.

Much of life is beyond your control. You get frustrated by delays and stuck in traffic, and there's nothing you can do about it. You just sit there. Someone went to Walmart for a friend and said, "I'm so glad I went for you. There are so many people you would have died."

But even more than that, the most important things in life are often beyond your control. I've met with couples who've wanted to have a baby, and it just wasn't happening. I've met with singles who wanted to get married, and it just wasn't happening. People who did not want to grow older and end up alone. Lots of things just end up being out of your control. When that happens, we get frustrated and we lose our peace of mind.

- When people are unchangeable, we lose our peace.

People naturally resist change, and they resent it when you try to change them. Have you ever tried to change anyone? A personal improvement program for your husband or wife or children? They just don't cooperate, and you can't figure out why they aren't working on this. It's for their own good! They resist it, and they resent you. The quickest way to lose your peace of mind is to try to change somebody else because most people are just not going to change. So we get frustrated and lose our peace.

- When problems are unexplainable.

We know that life is not fair. Not everybody has a happy ending and lives happily ever after. Things don't always turn out right. What makes it more difficult is that you are not always going to know why. And when you don't know why things don't happen in your life the way you intend for them to do, you tend to get frustrated, you tend to get anxious, nervous, and stressed, and you lose your peace.

God has promised peace of mind because it's a fundamental need of your life. One of the Hebrew names of God is Jehovah Shalom. Shalom means peace. Jehovah Shalom means, "I am the God of peace." The most used greeting in the New Testament between Christians is "Grace" and "Peace." We are to live peaceful lives.

*"I am leaving you with a gift – peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give isn't fragile like the peace the world gives. So don't be troubled or afraid."* John 14:27

If God says, "I'm offering you a gift of peace," He means it. It's not something you work for. It's not something you deserve. It's not something you try for. You don't beg for peace. You don't plead for peace. It is simply a gift. Then why don't I have it?

Worrying about what cannot be changed won't give you peace. Becoming resentful or bitter about what cannot be changed will not give you peace. Feeling guilty about things that cannot be changed will not give you peace. Having self-pity over things that cannot be changed in your life will not give you peace.

Isaiah 26:3 says, *"You, Lord, give true peace to those who depend on You, because they trust in You."* God gives peace to those who trust in Him because they depend on Him.

*"Since we have been made right in God's sight by faith, we have peace with God because of what Jesus Christ our Lord has done for us."* Romans 5:1

*"If a person's thinking is controlled by his sinful self, then there is death. But if his thinking is controlled by the Spirit, then there is life and peace."* Romans 8:6

What is it that you're still angry with God about? That marriage that didn't work out? That marriage that never happened? That handicap in your life or that of a loved one? That big disappointment that came from what you hoped would happen but didn't? Those plans that you planned that didn't go the way you planned them? That loved one who died before you thought it was their time because you know better than God? What are you still resentful of God about? Do you realize that when you hold on to your anger, you're saying, "I know better than, God." You are cutting off the very source of hope, healing and help you need in your own life. And you need to let it go. There is only one way to peace—through acceptance, trust and surrender.

## 5. CHRISTMAS IS TIME TO REBUILD RELATIONSHIPS.

*"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men."* Luke 2:14

Christmas is a time for reconciliations. In the Peanuts cartoon, Lucy says to Charlie Brown, "Charlie Brown, it's the Christmas season. I think we ought to bury our differences, forgive each other and try to be kind and get along." Charlie Brown says, "Great! But why just this season? Why not all year?" Lucy says, "What do you think I am, some kind of fanatic?"

Holiday seasons, rather than promoting harmony, are often a time of conflict. You see relatives that you don't particularly like. All families have difficulties. There's jealousy, grudges, resentment, misunderstanding. There are those special relatives whose elevator doesn't go all the way to the top, and everybody knows it. It causes conflict.

Who do you need to reach out to this Christmas? Who do you need to write a letter to, make a call to? Who do you need to offer forgiveness to? Who do you need to ask forgiveness from and restore relationships?

What's the key to happy relationships? *"If we are living in the light of God's presence, just as Christ does, then we have wonderful fellowship and joy with each other."* 1 John 1:7

When Christ is in me and Christ is in you, then Christ isn't going to argue with Christ. We're never going to have peace on earth until the Prince of Peace reigns in everybody's heart. At Christmas time, we need to rebuild relationships.

It's time to release your fears. Let go and let God handle that problem you've been worried about. Just say, "I'm going to let go of it and give You this problem." It's time to renew your faith. That's Good News. God says, "I love you. I made you. You matter to Me. I want you to know Me." That's Good News! Renew your faith. Come back to God. It's time to receive forgiveness. "Unto you is born a Savior." If God hadn't thought you needed a Savior, He certainly wouldn't have sent one. You need it. Admit it. "I need You, Christ, as my Savior. I don't stand a hope in a million of making it to heaven on my own effort." And it's time to rebuild relationships. Why don't you start by establishing the most important relationship? That's the one between you and God.

Ultimately, Christmas is a time for you to meet Christ. Too many people celebrate Christmas without even knowing the One we celebrate!