

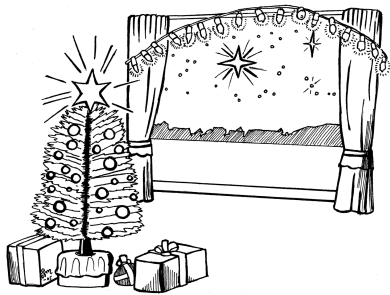
The Meaning of Christmas

Every December in many cities around the world you are likely to see bright lights and hear happy music. It's Christmas time. People of many ethnic backgrounds and beliefs like to celebrate this holiday. Bright lights and shiny ornaments on trees along with the fun of giving and receiving gifts add to the festivity.

Where did this celebration come from? What does it mean? As we explore the events behind the fun, we will find a fascinating story about the birth of a very intriguing individual named Jesus.

Stars and Prophecies

Let's begin with the beautiful lights strung all around houses and the star we often see on the top of a Christmas tree. Stars have long been studied both by astronomers and those who try



to predict the future. Approximately two thousand years ago, a group of philosophers in Asia, called wise men, had been studying the stars and some ancient scriptures. Traditions and prophecies told of a great Rescuer who would one day be born to help the world turn away from evil and be free from suffering.

They also had studied ancient scriptures written by prophets in Palestine. These predicted the unique birth of a ruler whose compassionate character would shine like a star. As they read they became excited, realizing the dates the prophecies pointed to were the very days in which they were living.

One night they were startled to see a new star in the skies. It was not a planet. It was not stationary like normal stars. It seemed to move from where they were towards Israel. Could this be a sign that the predicted Rescuer had been born? They could not sit still waiting and wondering. They prepared some costly gifts, mounted camels, and followed the star.

When they arrived in Jerusalem, the wise men asked, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him." The people were very startled by this sudden appearance of wealthy philosophers and their unusual question. Nobody seemed to know the answer. In fact, the present ruler, King Herod, was really troubled at the thought of a rival to his throne.

The religious leaders should have known that it was time for their own scriptures to be fulfilled. They had become careless. However, they did know where the scriptures predicted that the Rescuer would be born. They told the wise men this special birth would take place in the small village of Bethlehem. King Herod told them, "Go and search carefully for the young Child, and when you have found Him, bring back word to me, that I may come and worship

Him also." His words disguised his evil intent to protect his kingdom by murdering the child.

The wise men waited until nightfall, when, delighted to see the star again, they traveled to Bethlehem and found the newborn baby whose name was Jesus, which means "the one who rescues." That is why you see so many stars and lights at Christmas time.

Gifts at Christmas

Perhaps you've wondered why so many people around the world give gifts right before the international New Year. It is



connected to the three special gifts that the wise men gave Jesus. They gave gold, frankincense and myrrh. Giving gifts is a wonderful way to express love and appreciation. Parents feel honored when their children show gratitude with a gift. A wife feels very pleased when her husband takes time to choose something special to demonstrate his affection. Coworkers and their bosses enjoy the exchange of little gifts at Christmas to breakup the monotony of work.

At the time of Jesus' birth, gifts such as gold, frankincense, and myrrh were only given to a king. These wise men were truly convinced that this little baby was someone very special. They showed their respect and honor in the best way they could.

In the meantime, King Herod was preparing a sword instead of a gift. We will come back to him and his evil designs, but first let's look at the actual birth of this unique child Jesus.

Surprise in a Stable

The mother of Jesus was named Mary. Awhile before the wise men had come, she and her husband had made the difficult trip of 140 kilometers to the town of Bethlehem. The trip on the back of a donkey had been painful because Mary was pregnant and about to deliver. King Herod had demanded that everyone return to the place of his ancestors' birth for a census. This is why Joseph, Mary's husband, had been forced to travel to Bethlehem during the late stage of her pregnancy.

When they arrived, they searched everywhere for a place to stay. So many people were visiting the town that there was no room to rent anywhere. Mary began to have labor pains and Joseph desperately pleaded for a room. No one took pity on them. Perhaps they did not have enough money to convince the innkeepers. As often happens, people were more concerned about profit than about people in need.

Finally, one man allowed them to use his animal stable. Mary lay down on the straw exhausted. There was no midwife, no doctor or family to help her. Instead, smelly animals surrounded her. She gave birth to a son, wrapped him tenderly in strips of cloth, and soothed him to sleep in a feeding trough!

Hardly anyone noticed the birth, yet today, in many nations around the world, this story is acted out in plays and the story is told over and over. In many places you can see sculptures of the manger scene with cattle and sheep peering in at the tired mother with her precious baby bundled on the straw.

Why would someone born in poverty attract such attention? When the wise men brought their expensive gifts and worshipped baby Jesus, the villagers stared in surprise. All they could see was a very poor family. They didn't know that the predicted compassionate Rescuer had been born. That was why the wise men treated Jesus like royalty! It is part of the reason people give gifts at Christmas time.

An Angel with a Startling Message

On Christmas cards and on Christmas trees you will often see pictures of angels. The ancient scriptures record that months before the birth of Jesus, Mary had become engaged to a carpenter named Joseph. Shortly after, something very unusual happened. An angel appeared to Mary. She was very frightened. The angel reassured her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins."

Mary wondered what the angel could possibly mean. The religion and morals of her country was very strict. "How can this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" The angel answered, "Nothing is impossible with God.

The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you."

It sounded so strange, so unbelievable. Mary, however, remembered the prophecies in the ancient scriptures that promised the Rescuer would be born miraculously to a virgin. Could God have chosen her? Was God finally fulfilling His promise to bring wisdom, peace, and freedom from suffering to a poverty-filled and war-torn world?

Mary knew she was not dreaming. An angel truly was speaking to her. Her fear and questions fell away. "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Then the angel left her.

Can you imagine how Mary must have felt? Surely she was excited to know she had been chosen to receive the Rescuer for whom so many were eagerly waiting. At the same time, she must have been concerned about what people would say. Would anyone believe her when she said she was pregnant through God's power? Would her fiancé think she had been unfaithful?

When Joseph heard, he was very upset. He had trusted that Mary was a pure and loyal lady. He was disappointed and shamed to hear she was pregnant. However, Joseph's heart was kind. He didn't want to disgrace her publicly. He planned to break the engagement privately.

That night, an angel appeared to him in a dream saying, "Joseph, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. This baby is truly conceived by

the Holy Spirit. She will have a son. Name Him Jesus, because this name means the One who saves people from their sins.”

Amazed at God’s special plan, Joseph’s disappointment and shame went away. He chose to take Mary as his wife. They eagerly waited to see what would become of this miraculous child. This is the reason that at Christmas time you see pictures of angels and a mother holding a baby along with many animals.

A Time for Singing

Have you heard people singing at Christmas time? There are hundreds of special Christmas carols that people sing to celebrate this amazing story. The singing goes back in history to the night of Jesus’ birth.



Some of the poorest people in the country of Israel were shepherds. They often slept outside to protect their sheep. On the night of Jesus’ birth, a group of shepherds suddenly came running through the streets from outside the town where they’d been watching the sheep. They shouted to everyone they met along the road, “An important baby has been born tonight! We were startled by a bright light and suddenly saw an angel appear. He said to us, ‘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 (Bethlehem), a Rescuer 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.’”

The shepherds said that after this amazing announcement, many angels appeared in the sky singing incredibly beautiful songs. Today, no one knows the tune, but some of the words have been recorded. They were, “Glory to God in the highest and on earth, peace, goodwill to men.” There is something in the birth of this child that makes people want to write new songs and sing. That is why we hear so many special songs at Christmas time.

The shepherds found baby Jesus wrapped in pieces of cloth and lying in a manger, just as the angel had said. They bowed to worship Him, in awe that this special child would be born to a poor family and that the news had been told to poor people such as themselves.

The ancient scriptures say that this was the very reason that Jesus was born in such a humble way. He had given up the peacefulness and beauty of heaven to experience the hardship and poverty of humans. He had come to share their suffering and provide a way of escape. If He had been born in a palace, the poor might have feared to approach Him. He wanted everyone to come near and learn of God’s compassion. He was like a king, going among his peasants, to understand their difficulties and to help them improve their lives.

That is why the wealthy wise men and the poor shepherds both recognized that someone very special had come to earth.

An Angry King and a Close Escape

King Herod was anxiously waiting to hear back from the wise men. However, as the wise men slept, an angel also appeared to them and told them to go back to their country using a different route. They were not to tell King Herod about seeing Jesus.

The angel woke Joseph and urged him to flee with Mary and Jesus to the country of Egypt since Herod would try to kill the baby.

When King Herod realized the wise men had tricked him, his fear grew to intense anger and he ordered soldiers to search for and kill all the baby boys, age two years and younger. Death, heartache, and deep sorrow ripped across the countryside. Herod’s selfishness and greed caused intense suffering, those same qualities which often causes misery and distress today.

The baby Jesus escaped Herod’s wicked plotting. Nothing could destroy God’s plan. Jesus was safely hidden in the country of Egypt. Time passed and Herod died. An angel once again appeared to Joseph telling him to return to Israel where Jesus would grow up to live out the special purposes for which He had come to earth. In a few years, Jesus’ wise preaching and miracles of healing attracted thousands. People were very grateful because Jesus had power to cast out evil spirits and was willing to help the poor as well as foreigners from any nationality. In time, jealous and

corrupt leaders crucified Him on a cross. Then more than five hundred of His followers took the news throughout the world that they had seen Jesus alive after being dead for three days. They helped many people by teaching them to pray to God in Jesus' name.

Will You be Like Herod or Jesus?

The celebration of Christmas invites us to choose the qualities of Jesus and the wise men instead of King Herod. When Herod died there was no one who mourned his death except his immediate family. In fact, his subjects were happy the king had died because he was very unkind and selfish. Today, very few people know his name or his accomplishments.

On the other hand, millions know the name Jesus *Christ* from which we get the word *Christmas*. They honor Jesus whose name means "the one set apart to rescue and heal." Jesus became known as a great teacher and prophet. His parables, stories, and sayings have been translated into hundreds of languages. His acts of compassion for the poor and the sick have inspired millions. He lived to help others and not for His own interests.

We also must choose which way we will live. Will we seek our own pleasures and positions of power like King Herod? Or will we choose to help others and to sacrifice time and money to make our families, our villages and our countries places of peace? If we look carefully, we can see that true happiness comes to those who choose self-sacrifice and kindness instead of greed and selfishness.

Christmas can remind us of this reality. We can start on the right path by choosing to do one simple act of kindness this week. Will you try it and see what happens?

It is true that in many places the real meaning of Christmas has been forgotten. Businesses use this holiday to make money, entice people to buy all kinds of useless things, while poor people go hungry or freeze in the mountains without adequate houses and blankets.

Made-up stories about Santa Claus, elves, and flying reindeer are more frequently heard on television than the true story of Jesus' birth. We can see how easily greed and foolishness crowd out the qualities of true beauty, wisdom and nobility, but it does not need to be that way for us. Now that we understand more about Christmas, we can gain a lot from its meaning. Here is a short summary:

1. Twinkling lights and stars. We can be like the wise men and search the ancient scriptures to know its prophecies and follow its words of truth.

If you would like to know more about the story of Jesus visit mylanguagemylife.com, write to info@reachtheworldnextdoor.com.

2. Joyful Christmas songs. The song said, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace and goodwill to men." We can be like the shepherds, seeking peace and goodwill by sharing good news. We can be like the angels by giving honor and thanks to the God who has

power to help us forgive our enemies and choose kindness instead of hatred. Call 1-936-228-1956 if you would like to talk to someone about how to do this.

3. Christmas—named after Jesus Christ. When we hear the word Christmas we can remember the meaning of the name Jesus Christ, "the one set apart to rescue and heal." We can join millions of others in honoring His special life, studying His teachings and receiving His power to help us with our various challenges and needs.

4. Gifts. We can be like the wise men who gave to those in need. We can be like Jesus who did not seek after honor and position, but chose to give of Himself to help those caught in sorrow and suffering.

Visit asapministries.org to learn of ways that followers of Jesus are giving food, clothing, education, and hope for the future to refugees in America and the poor in Southeast Asia.

So it makes a lot of sense to join in with those who say, "**Merry Christmas!**" If people ask what it means, share with them the story you have learned and invite them to enjoy the peace and joy of this holiday.

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