

The Christmas Story: Does It Still Matter?

By Rusty Wright

What does Christmas mean to you? Times with family and friends; perhaps carols, cards, television specials; maybe hectic shopping, parties, and eating too much.

All these and more are part of a modern Christmas. But what about the first Christmas? Why is the original story—the baby in a manger, shepherds, wise men, angels—important, if at all?

May I invite you to consider eight reasons why the original Christmas story matters, even to you? You may not agree with all of them, but perhaps they will stimulate your thinking, and maybe even kindle some feelings that resonate with that famous story.

First of all, the Christmas story is important because it is...

A Story That Has Endured

For two millennia, people have told of the child in a Bethlehem manger; of angels who announced his birth to shepherds; of learned men who traveled a great distance to view him.¹

That a story persists for many years does not prove its truthfulness. Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, and the Tooth Fairy survive in the popular imagination. But a twenty-century tenure at least merits our consideration. What deep human longings does the Christmas story portray? Why has it connected so profoundly with millions of people?

Is the story factual? Curiosity prompts further investigation.

Secondly, the Christmas story is also...

A Story of Hope and Survival

Jesus' society knew great pain and oppression. Rome ruled. Corrupt tax collectors burdened the people. Some religious leaders even sanctioned physical beating of Jewish citizens participating in compulsory religious duties.²

Joseph and his pregnant wife Mary travelled a long distance to Bethlehem to register for a census, but could not obtain proper lodging. Mary bore her baby and laid him in a manger, a feeding trough for animals. Eventually, King Herod sought to kill the baby. Warned of impending risk, Joseph and Mary

fled to Egypt with their son, and then returned home after Herod's death.

Imagine how Mary felt. Traveling while pregnant would be challenging. Fleeing to another nation lest some king slay your son would not be pleasant. Yet she, Joseph, and Jesus survived the ordeal.

In the midst of social and cultural challenges, the Christmas story offers hope and encouragement toward survival and hope of new life linked to something—someone—greater than oneself. One of Jesus' followers said Jesus' "name... [would] be the hope of all the world".³

So, the Christmas story is important because it has endured and because it speaks of hope and survival.



Although it is not known how many wise men traveled to Judea to find the infant Jesus, three are popularly shown in Christmas art: one black, one caucasian, and one oriental.



Reason number three: the Christmas story is...

A Story of Peace and Goodwill

Christmas carollers sing of “peace on earth”. Greeting cards extol peace, families desire it, and the news reminds us of its fleeting nature.

Psychologist Daniel Goleman in his best-selling book *Emotional Intelligence* tells of boarding a New York City bus to find a driver whose friendly greeting and positive disposition spread contagious warmth among the initially cold and indifferent passengers. Goleman envisioned a “virus of good feeling” spreading through the city from this “urban peacemaker” whose good will had softened hearts.⁴

The Christmas angel announced to some shepherds: “Don’t be afraid!... I bring you good news of great joy for everyone! The Saviour—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born tonight in Bethlehem, the city of David!”⁵ A crowd of angels then appeared, praising God and

proclaiming peace among people of good will.⁶

The Christmas story brings a message of peace that can soothe anxious hearts and calm interpersonal strife.

Reason number four: the Christmas story is...

A Story of Family

Christmas is a time for family gatherings. This interaction can bring great joy or great stress. Estrangement or ill will from past conflicts can explode.

Joseph and Mary had their share of family challenges. Consider their circumstances. The historical accounts indicate that Joseph’s fiancée became pregnant, even though she was a virgin. Mary believed an angel told her she was pregnant by God. Now, how would you feel if your fiancé/fiancée exhibited apparent evidence of sexual activity with someone else during your engagement? Suppose your intended said that God had sanctioned

the whole thing. Would your trust and self-esteem take a nosedive? Would you cancel the wedding?

Joseph, described as “a just man, decided to break the engagement quietly, so as not to disgrace... [Mary] publicly”.⁷ But an angel appeared to him in a dream, explaining that the child was conceived in her by God, and told him to “name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins”.⁸ Joseph followed those instructions and cared for his family. His continuing commitment to Mary and Jesus played a significant part in the boy’s birth and early childhood. With God’s help, the family overcame major obstacles. And so can your family.

Fifth, the story of Christmas is also...

A Story of Humility

When kings, presidents, and other rulers appear in public, there is often great pomp. From a biblical perspective, God came first, not as a ruling king, but as a servant, a

baby born in humble circumstances. His becoming human helps humans identify with Him.

Imagine that you and your child are walking in a field and you encounter an ant pile with hundreds of ants scurrying about. In the distance, you see a construction bulldozer approaching. Suppose your child asks how to warn the ants of impending danger. You discuss various possibilities: shouting, holding up signs, etc. But the best solution would be if somehow your child could become an ant and warn them personally. Some ants might not believe the danger. But some might believe and take steps to ensure their safety.

Paul, an early follower of Jesus, wrote of the humility Jesus displayed by becoming human:

Though he was God, he did not demand and cling to his rights as God. He made himself nothing; he took the humble position of a slave and appeared in human form. And in human form he obediently humbled himself even further by dying a criminal's death on a cross. Because of this, God raised him up to the heights of heaven.⁹

The Christmas story speaks of family and humility. But is it true?¹⁰

The sixth reason why the Christmas story matters: it is...

A Story That Was Foretold

Jesus' followers noted numerous clues to his identity, prophecies written many years before His birth.¹¹

The Hebrew writer Micah told around 700 BC of deliverance through a coming Messiah or "Anointed One" from Bethlehem.¹² We know that "...Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea..."¹³

Isaiah, writing around 700 BC, foretold that the Messiah would be born of a virgin. He wrote: "The Lord himself will give you a sign: the virgin will be with child and will

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give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel".¹⁴ The name "Immanuel" means "God with us". Biblical accounts claim Jesus' mother was a virgin when she bore him.¹⁵

Additional prophecies concern the Messiah's lineage, betrayal, suffering, execution, and resurrection. Peter Stoner, a California mathematician, once calculated the probability of just eight of the 300 prophecies Jesus fulfilled coming true in one person due to chance alone. Using estimates that both he and classes of college students considered reasonable and conservative, Stoner concluded there was one chance in 10¹⁷ that those eight were fulfilled by fluke.

He says 10¹⁷ silver dollars would cover the state of Texas two feet deep. Mark one coin with red fingernail polish. Stir the whole batch thoroughly. What chance would a blindfolded person have of picking the marked coin on the first try? One in 10¹⁷, the same

chance that just eight of the 300 prophecies "just happened" to come true in this man, Jesus.¹⁶

In a similar vein, consider the seventh reason why the original Christmas story matters. It is...

A Story That Has Substantial Support

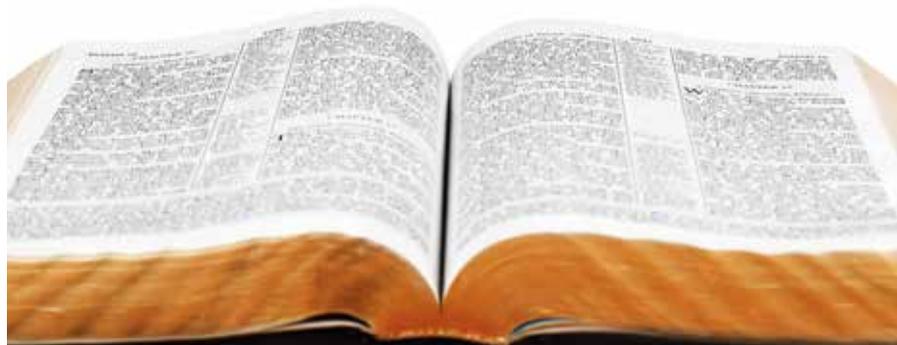
Can we trust the biblical accounts of the Christmas story? Consider three important points:

1. Eyewitness Testimony

The Gospels—presentations of Jesus' life—claim to be, or bear evidence of containing, eyewitness accounts. In a courtroom, eyewitness testimony is among the most reliable evidence.

2. Early Date

Dr. William F. Albright, one of the world's leading archaeologists, dated every book of the New Testament (NT) before about AD 80.¹⁷ There is no known record of NT factual authenticity ever being successfully challenged by a contemporary.



Some 300 prophecies concerning Jesus' lineage, birth, betrayal, suffering, execution, and resurrection can be found in the scriptures of the Old Testament.



You can celebrate this Christmas knowing that you are a member of Jesus' family.

3. Manuscript Evidence

Over 24,000 early manuscript copies of portions of the NT exist today. Concerning manuscript attestation, Sir Frederic Kenyon, director and principle librarian of the British Museum, concluded: "Both the authenticity and the general integrity of the books of the New Testament may be regarded as finally established".¹⁸

The Christmas story is notable for its enduring messages of hope, peace, goodwill, family, and humility. It was foretold by prophets and has substantial manuscript support. But there is another reason for considering the story of Jesus' birth, perhaps the most important.

Reason number eight: the Christmas story is...

A Story of Love

Jesus' followers taught that his conception and birth were part of a divine plan to bring us genuine peace, inner freedom, and self-respect. They believed the biblical God wants us to enjoy friendship with Him, and meaning, and purpose. Alas, our own

self-centeredness separates us from Him. Left to our own, we would spend both time and eternity in this spiritually unplugged state.

Jesus came to help plug us into God. Mary's baby was born to die, paying the penalty for our self-centeredness, which the biblical documents call "sin". If I had a traffic fine I could not pay, you could offer to pay it for me. When the adult Jesus died on the cross, he carried the penalty due all our sins, then rose from the dead to give new life.

Jesus explained: "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life".¹⁹ God can become your friend if you believe in him, that is, if you trust him to forgive you. He will never let you down.

Perhaps you are becoming aware of the importance of the Christmas story in your own life. Might you like to receive Jesus' free gift of forgiveness and place your faith in him? You can celebrate this

Christmas knowing that you are a member of his family.

Christmas is meant to celebrate peace and joy. Amidst the busy-ness of shopping, parties, presents, and fun, remember that the Prince of Peace came to spread peace and joy to all who believe in Him.

Notes

¹ Details of the Christmas story are in Luke 1-2 and Matthew 1:18-2:23.

² Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973 printing of the 1883 original), i:372.

³ Matthew 12:21, *New Living Translation*.

⁴ Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence* (New York: Bantam Books, 1997), ix-x.

⁵ Luke 2:10-11 NLT.

⁶ Luke 2:13-14, *New American Standard Bible*.

⁷ Matthew 1:19 NLT.

⁸ Matthew 1:21 NLT.

⁹ Philippians 2:6-9 NLT.

¹⁰ For more on evidence for Jesus, see www.WholisJesus-Really.com and www.probe.org.

¹¹ For a summary of prophecies Jesus fulfilled, see Josh McDowell, *Evidence that Demands a Verdict* (San Bernardino, CA: Here's Life Publishers, 1979), 141-177.

¹² Micah 5:2.

¹³ Matthew 2:1 NASB.

¹⁴ Isaiah 7:14 New International Version.

¹⁵ Matthew 1:18, 22-25; Luke 1:27, 34.

¹⁶ Peter W. Stoner, *Science Speaks* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1969), 99-112.

¹⁷ McDowell, *op. cit.*, 62-63.

¹⁸ Frederic G. Kenyon, *The Bible and Archaeology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1940), 288; in McDowell, *op. cit.*, 41. McDowell develops these points in pp. 39-41ff.

¹⁹ John 3:16 NLT.

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