

# The Response to Christmas

## This Week's Devotions

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Luke 2:21-52  
Matt 2:1-13-23  
John 16  
1 Peter 1  
John 3  
Psalm 72

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1 John 1:5-7  
*5 This is the message which we have heard from Him and declare to you, that God is light and in Him is no darkness at all. 6 If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. 7 But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.<sup>1</sup>*

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How do you respond to Christmas?

How do you respond to the materialism of the season?

Are gifts wrong?

What is your attitude towards friends and acquaintances who do not celebrate Christmas in a Christian fashion? What should it be?

In what ways are Anna and Simeon similar?

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<sup>1</sup>All Scripture is taken from the New King James Version, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers) 1998, c1982.

One Christmas Eve, Ira D. Sankey was traveling by steamboat up the Delaware River. Asked to sing, Mr. Sankey sang the "Shepherd Song." After the song was ended, a man with a rough, weather-beaten face came up to Mr. Sankey and said: "Did you ever serve in the Union Army?" "Yes," answered Mr. Sankey, "in the spring of 1860."

Can you remember if you were doing picket duty on a bright, moonlit night in 1862?" "Yes," answered Mr. Sankey, very much surprised.

"So did I," said the stranger, "but I was serving in the Confederate army. When I saw you standing at your post I said to myself: "That fellow will never get away from here alive." I raised my musket and took aim. I was standing in the shadow completely concealed, while the full light of the moon was falling upon you.

"At that instant, just as a moment ago, you raised your eyes to heaven and began to sing. Music, especially song, has always had a wonderful power over me, and I took my finger off the trigger. "Let him sing his song to the end," I said to myself. "I can shoot him afterwards. He's my victim at all events, and my bullet cannot miss him." But the song you sang then was the song you sang just now. I heard the words perfectly:

*We are Thine, do Thou befriend us,  
Be the guardian of our way.*

"Those words stirred up many memories in my heart. I began to think of my childhood and my God-fearing mother. She had many, many times sung that song to me. But she died all too soon, otherwise much in my life would no doubt have been different.

"When you had finished your song it was impossible for me to take aim at you again. I thought: "The Lord who is able to save that man from certain death must surely be great and mighty" and my arm of its own accord dropped limp at my side."

—*Religious Digest*<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Tan, Paul Lee, *Encyclopedia of 7,700 Illustrations*, (Garland, Texas: Bible Communications, Inc.) 1996.

In this modern world, Christians are frequently accused of being intolerant. This notion rises from the lack, on the part of Christians, to accept Buddha, or Allah, or a multitude of other gods, as being the same God as Jesus Christ. We are shocked at the attitudes displayed by a pagan world. We are amazed that we cannot display the nativity in public places, or decorate our offices with Bible quotes, or openly start conversations about Jesus. But, should any of this surprise us?

The joy and the promise found in the attitudes of Anna and Simeon set the pattern for our Christmas worship. We, Christians, see Jesus as the Hope of the future. We find in Jesus a great peace and comfort. This gives rise to our joy and celebration.

But we are children of the Light. Those who are not Christians are children of the dark. And the dark does not like God. Is it any wonder that the children of the dark should not like God and the things of God. The world acts just the way we would expect the unsaved to respond. After all, consider the response to the birth of the King.

The Herods are a wonderful group to use as a model of modern man's dysfunctional, socially depraved, family unit. Daddy Herod ----

Herod is about 70 years old when Jesus is born. He is noted for his cruelty, which included the "accidental" drowning of his brother-in-law, and the murder or execution of his wife, Miriamme, her father and mother, and two of his/their sons.

So, here come the Magi, the wisemen of the East. (It is unclear in this day and age what the exact meaning of "Magi" means. Wisemen is a reasonable approximation.) They follow the supernatural star looking for the King. Naturally, they stop for directions in finding this King. And what better place to stop than at the White House of Jerusalem to inquire of Herod about his future replacement. One can feel the tension in the room as the Magi and Herod discuss this event. Herod's response is intolerant.

What produces such an event? We need but look at the world around us to discover the answer, at least on the surface. Tensions run high, on a continual basis, between the Jews and the Arabs. The Serbs fight the Bosnians in what is essentially a religious war. Rival tribes battle in Africa. Racial tensions flare in the US. Mankind is always at odds with someone over something.

If one remembers that Bethlehem would have been a small farming town in 4 B.C., Herod's killing of "all the male children under two" becomes almost trivial. Maybe twenty children are killed. As I prepare these lessons (October 2000), tensions are rampant in the Middle East and 94 people have been killed in small skirmishes between Palestinian and Israeli forces in this latest out break of trouble. Against the "Holy Wars" over the past 2,000 years, of what importance is Herod's attack?

Herod's response is recorded in Scripture to demonstrate the importance of Jesus' birth – and to show the contrast between the forces of Light and Dark. The initial evangelistic prophecy and action finds this battle in full force. God curses Satan, and in that curse we find the basis of all else.

Genesis 3:14-15

*14 So the LORD God said to the serpent:  
"Because you have done this,  
You are cursed more than all cattle,  
And more than every beast of the field;  
On your belly you shall go,  
And you shall eat dust  
All the days of your life.  
15 And I will put enmity  
Between you and the woman,  
And between your seed and her Seed;  
He shall bruise your head,  
And you shall bruise His heel."*

Notice a couple of other important points from the story about the Magi. First, the star reappears when the Magi leave Jerusalem, but it does not apparently appear for or to Herod. Only the faithful correctly read the signs of God (1Cor 2:14-16).

And, second, note that the priests, the keepers of God's Temple, could not bother themselves to travel the six miles to Bethlehem to check out this event for themselves. Many fight the Gospel message without any first hand knowledge of its contents. Many who are against Christianity have never opened a Bible.

2 Corinthians 4:3-4

*3 But even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, 4 whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them.*

And, note that Matt 2:3 us the entire city of Jerusalem is troubled. But, like the priests, the City does nothing. The common people are troubled, like we would be at an evening news report, but it goes no farther. There is no action.

On the other hand, Simeon and Anna cannot wait to celebrate the joyful arrival of the Messiah. Each, in his own way, recognizes who Jesus is and His importance to the world and especially to God's people. This highlights their similarities. They are the true people of God, awaiting Him in reverent worship, while being faithful to His direction on their lives as they wait.

Faith in God is rooted in divine revelation. This revelation first appeared in the prophecies of the Old Testament. This revelation reaches its climax in Jesus. The focus of the prophecies is the future, but the focus requires action in the present. Depending upon which side of the fence you occupy, your actions will be for or against God.

Jesus describes Himself as being about His Father's business (Luke 2:49: John 4:30). This business is to reveal God to men (John 1:18) and to redeem man from the powers of sin (Luke 19:10). Without Christmas, neither of these events could occur. Man himself must be "born" to be free. The real birth is the spiritual birth that brings man back into fellowship with God (John 3). This is the fulfillment of the evangelistic outreach of Genesis 3:15. This is the undoing of the damage caused by Satan and the serpent in the Garden of Eden.

So, in response to Christmas, consider the significance of the birth of Jesus?

What are the practical ramifications of the Savior's birth? Is it different for Christians and non-Christians?

The pattern of everyone's response is fixed by the stories found in Matthew 2 and Luke 2. Mankind will

- Be for Jesus and God and accept Him as Lord and Savior
- Be actively against Jesus and God and fight Him as Lord and Savior
- Be indifferent to the whole thing. Except, notice that time usually turns apathy into antagonism. By the time of the Cross, the people of Jerusalem were actively against Jesus.