

Christmas 2000

A study on the importance and significance
of the event

All Scriptures are taken from the New King James Version of the Holy Bible.

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The Map of Christmas
December 3

The Week's Devotions

Monday, November 27	Genesis 3
Tuesday, November 28	Genesis 38
Wednesday, November 29	1 Chronicles 27/28
Thursday, November 30	Malachi 4
Friday, December 1	Matthew 1:1-17
Saturday, December 2	Psalm 2

Luke 24:27

And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself.¹

As you reflect upon the suggested readings, what do you learn about the "seed?"

What can you learn about the relationship between God and man?

Do the Christmas prophecies tell us anything about the unfulfilled prophecies?

When the Messiah comes/came, is there a way to identify Him?

Does luck, fate, or providence control lives?

In the 1700's a little man in England, a cobbler by trade, who kept a map of the world on a wall of his workshop so that he could pray for the nations of the world, became burdened for a definite missionary outreach. When he shared his burden at a meeting of ministers, he was told by one of the senior men of God: "Young man, sit down. When God wants to convert the heathen, He will do it without your help or mine."

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

But William Carey did not let the fire of his enthusiasm be dampened by such a response, and eventually he left the shores of England for those of India, where he engaged in pioneer missionary work, doing exploits for God. ²

My wife and daughter recently drove to Philadelphia to attend the Women of Faith conference. They had directions but still managed to get lost. Isn't this the way life is? We faithfully study the maps, then when we look at the real world, the lines do not translate into real roads and we go off the wrong direction.

God provided the Israelites a road map to salvation – the Old Testament – a map that pointed to the Messiah, the Savior, the Christ – Jesus! We need to be careful not to be like the Jewish people and miss the Christ because we take a wrong turn.

There are over 300 prophecies in the Old Testament about the Messiah. We will focus on a few of the ones that point to the Messiah's birth – after all, that is what the Christmas season is all about.

The prophecies are designed to provide the Jewish people, indeed, all people with hope – and with a manner of identifying the Messiah when He arrived. We must remember, as we read the prophecies, that many had an important, immediate meaning to the Jewish nation. The prophecies had both a "near" meaning to the Jews and a "far" meaning for all of mankind.

Messiah properly means "anointed," as in the anointed one of God. Christ is the Greek version.

How can we know the Christ, when He arrives is the right person. How are we to know that Jesus is the Messiah? The Old Testament road map answers these questions for us.

The Old Testament was completed many hundred years before the birth of Christ. Yet, the Redeemer, Jesus Christ, fulfills all the prophecies about the Messiah's birth, life, and death, an event that, from a practical point of view, is mathematically impossible. The New Testament points to the credentials of Jesus as Messiah, as the Son of God and Savior, as a unique Person in relation to all others, and as King of the world.

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

Let us look, then, at some of the prophecies that point to Jesus as the Messiah.

From the beginning, God placed signs along the side of the road, directing all of us to the Messiah. The major highway we travel is the road of the "seed."

- Gen 3:15 is the first evangelistic message of the Bible. God curses Satan and holds forth the promise of hope for mankind, yet the prophecy is really directed toward Satan, and is one not only of hope, but also of struggle. The seed of woman and the seed of the serpent will struggle throughout recorded time, while the real battle is between Jesus and Satan. For us, it is important to recognize that the promise of delivery and victory is contained in this one short verse.

Genesis 3:15

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."

- Gen 4:25-26 Adam does not really figure directly into God's salvation equation. God provided Adam and Eve with coats of skins when He expelled them from the Garden, an act suggesting the sacrificing of an animal and the giving of blood for the covering. But the next road sign is the Godly line of Seth, Adam's third son. Seth means "to set" or "to appoint." Seth is appointed as the father of the line of godly people which will lead to the Savior. From Seth comes Noah and Abraham. Gen 9:26 finds the LORD, the God of Shem, being blessed. This points to a further division in Seth's line, namely, the choosing of one of Noah's sons to be the provider of the godly line.

- With Abraham, God changes His method of dealing with man. Heretofore, God had dealt with mankind, generally, as a whole. With Abraham, God picks one man. God covenants with Abraham, an unconditional covenant. God made all of the promises. Gen 12:1-3.
Now the LORD had said to Abram: "Get out of your country, From your family And from your father's house, To a land that I will show you. 2 I will make you a great nation; I will bless you And make your name great; And you shall be a blessing. 3 I will bless those who bless you, And I will curse him who curses you; And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

The covenant includes a specific portion of land and a specific nation (Israel), but there is a universal blessing upon all of the nations of the world. This blessing is, as we discover while we travel the road of the Old Testament, the Messiah. This promise is so important it is repeated to Abraham again in Chapters 13, 15, and 17.

- God continues to deal with individuals in the form of Abraham’s son and grandson – Isaac (Gen 17:19; 21:21) and Jacob (Gen 25:22-23; 28:13-14), although with Jacob there is a clear choice of Jacob over his older brother Esau. The on-going split of family line continues with the choice of Judah over the other twelve sons of Jacob – Gen 49:10
The scepter shall not depart from Judah, Nor a lawgiver from between his feet, Until Shiloh comes; And to Him shall be the obedience of the people.

The scepter refers to the royal line.

Shiloh means peace or peaceful, looking forward to the promise of Isaiah 9:6. Shiloh, then, is the seed of woman and the road to travel as Judah becomes the royal line of the blessing.

- Years of “silence” follow, first as Abraham’s children live and multiply in Egypt, then, during the period of the Judges after the Nation has entered the promised land. Then, God returns to the scene by picking a specific branch of the family of Judah and, thereafter, narrowing it down once more. In 1 Sam 16:1 (Isa 11:1, 10) the family of Jesse is chosen to be the bearer of the seed. Of Jesse’s sons, David is chosen to be the father of the royal line (1 Sam 16:12, 13; Is 9:6-7; 2 Sam 7:12-16). The prophecy is further given to pass this seed through David’s son, Solomon (2 Sam 7:12-17; 1 Chron 28:4-5). Many of the Old Testament stories show God’s unique preservation of this line (such as the saving of Joash in 2 Kings 11:1-3)

Along with this special preservation of the line, the prophets bring a unique picture of the Messiah. Many of these special pictures relate to the birth of Christ. For example,

- There is to be a forerunner to the Christ (Isa 40:3; Malachi 3:1), who is, of course, John the Baptist. [Mark 1:2-4]
- There is the miracle of the Virgin birth (Isa 7:13-14). [Matt 1:18-25; Luke 1:26-35]
- As an aside, Deuteronomy 23:2 declares that an illegitimate son could not enter the congregation of the Lord until the tenth generation. This would mean that such a son could not serve as king or priest. Perez, the son of Judah, was illegitimate by his daughter-in-law, Tamar. Based upon Matthew’s genealogy (Matt 1:3-6), David was the tenth generation from Perez.
- The royal line is cursed and cut off, yet the promise of the Seed is preserved (Jer 22:28-30). [Matt 1:1-17; Luke 3:23-38]
- Daniel predicts the time of Messiah’s birth (Dan 9:24-27). [Mark 11:1-11; Luke 19:29-38]

- Micah predicts the place of Messiah's birth (Micah 5:2-3). [Luke 2:1-7; Matt 2:1-6]
- Even though he is a prophet for hire, Balaam predicts the celestial announcement of the birth (Num 24:17) [Matt 2:1-2] and the arrival of the Magi is foreshadowed in Psalm 72 (esp. v10 & 15).

So, who will be the Messiah? What will He be like? Based upon the above,

- His birth will be supernatural
- He will come from the line of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Judah, and David
- He will be a male child
- The time of His birth will be around 1 BC/AD
- He will be born in Bethlehem
- His birth circumstances will identify Him as Messiah
- His life will fulfill the many other prophecies of Scripture

Consider the above in relation to Luke 1:32-33; 3:23-38; and Matt 1:1, 6-7.
Who is the Messiah?

What does all of this provide?

- Provides Hope to the Nation of Israel
- Is the basis of the believer's faith
- Is the representation of at least a portion of the Gospel in the Old Testament

The Event of Christmas
December 10

This Week's Devotions

Monday, December 4	Matthew 1:18-25
Tuesday, December 5	Luke 2:1-20
Wednesday, December 6	Isaiah 7
Thursday, December 7	Isaiah 9
Friday, December 8	Psalms 22
Saturday, December 9	Romans 5:1-11

Isaiah 9:6-7

*6 For unto us a Child is born, Unto us a Son is given; And the government will be upon I
Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. 7 Of the
increase of His government and peace There will be no end, Upon the throne of
David and over His kingdom, To order it and establish it with judgment and
justice From that time forward, even forever. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will
perform this.³*

What do you do on Christmas?

Should a Christian celebrate Christmas?

How did the miracles of the Old Testament prepare us for Christmas?

Consider the birth of Isaac (Gen 17:15-21), Samuel (1 Sam 1:1-2:10), and John the Baptist (Luke 1).

How did God reveal Himself to people?

Why was the birth of Jesus necessary?

For you, what is the most significant point about Christmas?

³All Scripture taken from the New King James Version, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers) 1998, c1982.

Have you ever stopped to think about why Christmas was necessary? How important is the incarnation (incarnation is the birth of Jesus, the God-man). I have heard a story that goes something like this:

There was a family living in the backwoods. Christmas eve arrived and the wife/mother and children washed and scrubbed to go to church. Dad was exhausted from the day's usual work efforts and expressed neither the ambition nor the desire to attend the worship service. Off goes the rest of the family to church while Dad curls up in his favorite easy chair in front of the fire. Dad promptly falls asleep. Some time later, Dad awakes to a terrible sounding thump in the background. Wait, there it is again – and again. Dad arises slowly to investigate. Looking out the front window, Dad is amazed to discover a fierce snow storm swirling around his home. The snows already several inches deep and the wind has created deep drifts. Just then a duck slams into the window! Thump!! This is the noise Dad has heard. A flock of ducks lost in the storm are attracted by the light of the blazing fire. Donning winter garb, Dad moves out into the storm. He tries yelling at the ducks. He stands in the yard flailing his arms. His goal is to chase the ducks into a shelter away from the storm. The ducks seem oblivious to his efforts. Thump! Thump! More crash into the windows. Oh, what can he do? Snow and ice hang from his hat. His breath is cold, freezing in his throat. If he doesn't do something soon, the ducks will die in the storm. He rushes to the barn doors and swings them open. He runs back to the yard jumping, waving his arms about, screaming at the top of his lungs, every effort directed at forcing the ducks into the shelter of the barn. All of his efforts fall short. He runs back to the house, returning moments later with grain and corn. He lays a path of food to the barn. If only he can entice one or two ducks to follow the food path, maybe the others will follow. Still, his efforts are in vain. Dad stands in the yard, in the middle of the storm, searching for answers.

"If only," he thinks, *"I were a duck, I could lead them into the barn."*

The story does not fit God's thought patterns, but the results are similar. God thinks, *"If only I were a human, I could show mankind how to find Me!"*

The prophecies of the Old Testament make it clear, at least from our perspective, that God's plan for the salvation of mankind began long ago and followed a very precise path. He is not Dad struggling in the storm looking for a means of saving us. No, God's plan was very precise and leads us directly to Christmas.

There are 89 chapters in the Gospels. They cover a period of approximately 35 years. Of these, 84 ½ chapters cover the last 3 years of this period, with 30 of these covering the last week of Jesus' life. There are only 4 ½ chapters which cover the first 30 years, yet, without the birth, the rest would not be necessary.

Christmas in this context means the celebration of the birth of Christ. The word comes from "Christ Mass," the celebration of the Christ. It is the story of God with us, of Immanuel come to earth, so that He may save us.

Matthew 1:21

And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name JESUS, for He will save His people from their sins."

Notice the preciseness of God's map. The genealogies Matthew and Luke trace the "Seed" of Genesis 3:15 from Adam, to Abraham, to Judah, to David, to Mary and Joseph (Matt 1:1-17; Luke 3:23-38).

The announcement of the coming Christ will be fulfilled with the birth of John the Baptist. Luke's birth story includes great detail on John's birth (Luke 1). The birth story of John is of little benefit to the actual Christmas story, but adulthood will find the Baptist fulfilling the prophecy of the herald of the Christ.

Micah's vision of the Christ being born in Bethlehem is fulfilled as the Roman Caesar moves into God's plan. The census forces Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem where Jesus is born. As Paul will later write, *"But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons"* (Galatians 4:4-5).

This fullness is a carefully orchestrated movement on the world stage as all the players take their place. The fullness involves more than just the Jewish people. The Romans have moved into control of the world, creating peace and roads. Although an oppressive government, the Romans have created control of different cultures and religions, setting the stage for the quick, sudden growth of Christianity.

And, thanks to the efforts of Alexander the Great, all the world speaks Greek. There is a common language for all to speak.

Then, in the quiet of the night, in a manner not fitting the King of the universe, God enters the world as a little child, in a dirty manger, in a little town, away from the lights of Hollywood and CNN. The entire action reminds us of God talking to Elijah.

1 Kings 19:11-12

11 Then He said, "Go out, and stand on the mountain before the LORD." And behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind tore into the mountains and broke the rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; 12 and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice.

The still small voice of God has spoken in this scene announced by the angels, not to the kings, rulers, rich, or famous of the world, but to the everyday people. God came to save the ducks! And we, the everyday people, are the ducks. In fact, anyone who accepts Jesus as Lord and Savior is part of the everyday people, one of the "ducks." This is the basis of Christmas.

The event we celebrate is the birth of God. Many have argued over the years that Christians should not celebrate Christmas. They claim the celebration is the adoption of a pagan holiday. They find the season to be commercial, not religious.

And, they are right – Christmas may well be partly based upon pagan holidays. And, in today's materialistic world, it certainly is commercial. But, does that mean we should not observe Christmas? I would answer with an emphatic NO!

It is true that potentially many pagan holidays were "incorporated" into defining the date of December 25. These include the Roman birthday of the unconquered sun (the feast of Saturnalia), the feast of Dionysus, and the Jewish feast of lights (Hanukkah). The Eastern church still celebrates the birth on January 6.

December 25 is defended as "the" date by a long line of church fathers. The date was used as early as AD 98 and observed in December on an irregular basis until around AD 360 when it became a fixture. During the interim, a variety of other dates were observed as the birth date of Christ. The important point is that the birth of Jesus was always observed in some fashion by the Church.

And, as the world turns farther and farther away from God and the Bible, more and more materialism slips into the "celebration" of the event. It becomes that much more important for us to remember the reason for the Christmas

celebration (Luke 2:21-40). But, as Christians, are response should follow the pattern of the Bible.

We may not know the precise date of Jesus' birth, but that is not really very important. The Church has chosen December 25 as being the symbol for the date of Christ's birth. There is a Christmas song based upon Matthew 2:10 that sums up our proper response:

When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy.

- The angels "sang" as they announced the birth.
- The shepherds rejoiced.
- The wisemen will eventually bring gifts.
- Isn't this the pattern of our response?
- Anna and Simeon did not worry about the date of Messiah's birth. They looked to the promise fulfilled in this little child.

And what a promise it was. Consider the true gifts of Christmas –

Consider, based solely on Romans 5, the gifts of Christmas:

- Jesus, a gift of God the Father, without cost, which gift is acquired by faith and by justification (v1)
- Peace with God (v1)
- Access to God (v2)
- Hope of glory of God (v2)
- Triumph over tribulation (v3,4)
- Love and the Holy Spirit (v5)
- Freedom from the wrath of God (v9)
- Salvation (v10)
- Rejoicing (v11)

The Response to Christmas
December 17

This Week's Devotions

Monday, December 11	Luke 2:21-52
Tuesday, December 12	Matt 2:1-13-23
Wednesday, December 13	John 16
Thursday, December 14	1 Peter 1
Friday, December 15	John 3
Saturday December 16	Psalm 72

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.⁴

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?

⁴All 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*⁵

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

⁵Tan, Paul Lee, *Encyclopedia of 7,700 Illustrations*, (Garland, Texas: Bible Communications, Inc.) 1996.

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.

Christmas Week

No Sunday School on December 24

This Week's Devotions

Monday, December 18	Ruth 4
Tuesday, December 19	Psalm 1
Wednesday, December 20	Psalm 23
Thursday, December 21	Jeremiah 29
Friday, December 22	Isaiah 11
Saturday, December 23	Luke 2

Matthew 1:23-25

*23 "Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel," which is translated, "God with us."
24 Then Joseph, being aroused from sleep, did as the angel of the Lord commanded him and took to him his wife, 25 and did not know her till she had brought forth her firstborn Son. And he called His name JESUS.⁶*

What do you do on Christmas?

How do you prepare for Christmas?

How does the past help us to understand the present and the future?

We read and re-read the Christmas story found in Matthew 1 and Luke 2. Why?

⁶Scripture taken from the New King James Version, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers) 1998, c1982.

The Roper Organization knows when we've been sleeping and knows when we're awake on Christmas Day. Here's what they discovered Americans do on the holiday:

- Open presents (68 percent)
- Visit family or friends (61 percent)
- Watch a football game (31 percent)
- Have a fire in the fireplace (15 percent)
- Leave food out for Santa (10 percent)
- Stay in bed sick or alone (4 percent)
- Go caroling (2 percent)
- Still ahead of the football game is attending church, an activity chosen by 39 percent of Americans.

-- "To Verify," *Leadership*.

What are you doing on Christmas?

The Future of Christmas
December 31

This Week's Devotions

Monday, December 25	Matthew 1:18-25
Tuesday, December 26	2 Thessalonians 2
Wednesday, December 27	2 Timothy 3
Thursday, December 28	Isaiah 44:24-45:25
Friday, December 29	Daniel 9
Saturday, December 30	Zechariah 14

Isaiah 55:10-11

*10 "For as the rain comes down, and the snow from heaven,
And do not return there,
But water the earth,
And make it bring forth and bud,
That it may give seed to the sower
And bread to the eater,
11 So shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth;
It shall not return to Me void,
But it shall accomplish what I please,
And it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it.⁷*

Who is in control? How do you know?

Is there a plan controlling the world?

Why has God revealed the future?

Has He revealed all of it?

How should all of God's revealed prophecy affect you?

⁷All Scripture taken from *the New King James Version, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers) 1998, c1982.*

The Lord Jesus Christ whom we exalt at Christmas is not just a baby in a manger. He is not a character in a children's story. He is far more.

The first time he came, he came veiled in the form of a child. The next time he comes, and we believe it will be soon, he will come unveiled, and it will be abundantly and immediately clear to all the world just who he really is.

The first time he came, a star marked his arrival. The next time he comes, the whole heavens will roll up like a scroll, and all the stars will fall out of the sky, and he himself will light it.

The first time he came, wise men and shepherds brought him gifts.

The next time he comes, he will bring gifts, rewards for his own.

The first time he came, there was no room for him. The next time he comes, the whole world will not be able to contain His glory.

The first time he came, only a few attended his arrival—some shepherds and some wise men. The next time he comes, every eye shall see him.

The first time he came as a baby. Soon he will come as Sovereign King and Lord.⁸

Jeremiah 29:11-13

11 For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope.

12 Then you will call upon Me and go and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. 13 And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart.

There is an aspect of Christmas that is often overlooked. This is the hope and future of the event, not in historical terms, but in terms of the future.

Christmas is but part of a sequence of events covering thirty some years in the "life" of an eternal God. It is one bookend on the shelf of the earthly life of Jesus. The other bookend is the Cross of Calvary. In between, God came to earth as a man, to show man how to find the shelter of God's arms, a shelter that protects from the storms of life and the wages of sin.

But, the future of Christmas extends beyond these bookends. Christmas is an incomplete event without the Cross and the Second Coming. God's plan continues to roll along. The map shows future landmarks we have not yet reached. Jesus is coming soon! This is the future of Christmas.

⁸Green, Michael P., *Illustrations for Biblical Preaching*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House) 1989.

The world is without hope if it is without Jesus. This is the underlying concept of the entire Bible. Yet, while the Gospel is global in its reach (Matt 24), so are the hooks of Satan. The Herods of the world will return time and again. Ultimately the anti-Christ will rule the world for a short period. Why? Because the response of most to Christ is the response of Herod coupled with the response of the citizens of Jerusalem.

How many Christmas specials did you encounter this year on television? How many of these spoke to the true hope of Christmas?

Just as God had to take the form of a man so that we thick-headed beings could understand His revelation, so, too, we must recognize there are many prophecies remaining to be fulfilled. Christmas has shown us that prophecy is certain. When God speaks, we have the full assurance that His Words are true and events will come to pass just as He has told us.

At the same time, prophecy is very perplexing. It is not always understandable, especially in our terms. God has revealed events to us through the eyes of people who lived 2,000-to-3,500 years ago. Language changes. Since symbols, for the most part, had to be understandable to the writers and hearers of the original words, we need to interpret Scripture in the context in which it has been given to us. The recent Y2K "scare" is an example of over-reaching the meaning of prophecies.

Not all prophecy will be recognized until after the fact. The Jews did not always see events as prophecy while they occurred. For example, Hosea 11:1 and Matt 2:14-15:

Hosea 11:1

"When Israel was a child, I loved him, And out of Egypt I called My son.

Matthew 2:14-15

14 When he arose, he took the young Child and His mother by night and departed for Egypt, 15 and was there until the death of Herod, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying, "Out of Egypt I called My Son."

And, not all prophecy is fulfilled in the manner expected by men. Jesus is the prime example of this. A reading of the Old Testament will clearly demonstrate that the prophets failed to find or understand the church age. The First and Second Comings of the Messiah were virtually simultaneous events for the Old Testament prophet. This accounts, in part, for the failure of the Jewish people to recognize Jesus for who He was.

It is important to understand that prophecy is not given so that we may know God's plans in advance. Prophecy is designed to enable us to see all of history as being part of God's plan. Prophecy and history combine to provide us with hope in God's plan and purpose. God truly is in control of the world. God's plan is in motion. We must recognize this fact and trust in God.

Peter frequently uses the Second Coming as the ultimate statement of hope. Jesus will return and exercise His rights as King. But, this Second Coming is only possible if there is a Christmas. Christmas does not stand alone – but it is absolutely necessary to God's plan. Christmas is the focal point of the plan in history.

Galatians 4:4

But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law

See also Matt 24, Luke 21, Mark 13, Rev, esp 19-22

- God's plan for the future is the basis for faith and obedience. It provides us with the motivation to place our full trust and obedience in God.

2 Peter 1:19

And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts;

See also 2 Pet 3:11-12; Is 55:10,11; 1 Thess 1:9-10, 2:19-20

- God's plan for the future provides us with comfort, especially in overcoming the fear of death.

Philippians 1:19-21

19 For I know that this will turn out for my deliverance through your prayer and the supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, 20 according to my earnest expectation and hope that in nothing I shall be ashamed, but with all boldness, as always, so now also Christ will be magnified in my body, whether by life or by death. 21 For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.

See also 2 Tim 1:11-13; Rom 8:18

- God's plan includes the existence of Heaven and Hell. This should provide a stark contrast leading to motivation for the unsaved to seek God.

Acts 2:38-40

38 Then Peter said to them, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall

receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. 39 For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call." And with many other words he testified and exhorted them, saying, "Be saved from this perverse generation."

- The revealing of God's plan in a form you can understand makes you God's friend (John 15:15) and child (1 John 3:1, 2).

Do you know the future?

Well, sort of . . .

Our Christian disagreements over the future should not prevent us from spreading the Gospel message. Some disagreements over the interpretation of prophecy are legitimate. But, one must ask, why would God reveal the future? Or, why has God not revealed all of it to us? And, why does He make it so hard to understand?

Paul speaks of mysteries. God has given us enough revelation to accomplish two things in life –

First, He has revealed Himself and His purpose in desiring to draw us back to Him. His Word shows us HOW TO FIND GOD.

Second, He has revealed to us His purposes for living and how to accomplish this. His Word shows us HOW TO LIVE ONCE WE HAVE FOUND GOD.

Too many people attempt to interpret God's Word and provide us answers to the second question without having cleared the first hurdle. Have you done this? Have you skipped salvation in an effort to learn how to be a good person and live a godly life?

However, mysteries seem to remain. God's revelation ends with Jesus. But, it ends with all of the promises held in the life of Jesus, past, present, and future. Christ will return to complete the fulfillment of prophecies. This return is what the book of Revelation is all about.

Have you found God?

If so, have you incorporated His teachings into your life?

If not, why not?