

Broomfield



PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH MINISTRY OF THE WORD

Volume 3 Issue 52

December 26, 2004

Those Who Missed Christmas

This past year, the boys and I have been reading through the *Chronicles of Narnia* written by C. S. Lewis. In Lewis' second book, Peter, Susan, Edmund, Lucy, and a dwarf named Trumpkin are portrayed as hastily climbing through the mountains in order to help Prince Caspian in his war to protect Narnia. At one point in their climb, they are confronted by the option of either going on a more difficult and dangerous path up the mountain or going on an easier and safer path down the mountain. Because by this time they are tired, frustrated, hungry, and low in patience, they opt to go on the easier path even though Aslan – who represents Christ in the story – was present and bidding them to travel the more difficult route.

Why did they ignore Aslan? Because, except for Lucy, they could not see Him. Their difficult circumstances drew their focus to themselves such that they were not thinking of, nor were they interested in Aslan and His kingdom. And Lucy being the youngest allowed her siblings to shame her into following them and not Aslan.

Now brothers and sisters, no doubt this scene was inspired by the teaching of Christ in such passages as these:

John 9:39, “And Jesus said, For judgment I am come into this world, that they which see not might see; and that they which see might be made blind.”

Matthew 13:13, “Therefore speak I to them in parables: because they seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand.”

Truly it is possible to be invested with an incredible amount of knowledge about God and His kingdom, and yet still miss Him! In fact, the text we are looking at this morning is one more example of this very point. As we have been discussing those who missed Christmas, I want us to consider one last group of individuals who completely missed Christ's birth: The proud.

The Proud Miss Christmas

Matthew 2:4-6, “And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born. And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written by the prophet, And thou Bethlehem, in the

land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel.”

To understand this passage, it is helpful to have a familiarity with the significance of the chief priests and scribes as mentioned in the Scriptures. Together, the chief priests and scribes constituted the ruling classes of Israel. As in any society, Judaism was represented by many different religious/political parties. Among these political groups in Israel of that day one would have found the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the zealots, and the Essenes. To identify yourself with any one of these groups said very little about what you did, rather it declared what you believed!

Now unlike the above named parties, the designation of Scribe and Priest represented an occupation or a calling. In Israel all the priests were of the priestly tribe of Levi and were a descendant of Aaron. The term *Chief Priests* would have referred to the priestly aristocracy that functioned on the Sanhedrin in the days of Christ. As a group of individuals, the designation of *chief priests* would have included the High Priest, who offered the paschal lamb once a year on the Day of Atonement. It also would have included the *Captain of the Temple* whose purpose was to serve the High Priest and thus to secure order. Because of Captain's calling, he oversaw the temple guards. This group also would have included the *Temple Treasurer*, the *leaders* of the daily and weekly course of *Priests*, and many other *Priests* from some of the more *influential families* of Jerusalem.

Now, whereas a local or regional priest generally held to the beliefs of the Pharisee, the Chief Priests mentioned above almost always were Sadducees. On the other hand the Scribes¹ were experts in the study of the Law of Moses—in fact in the New Testament they are often referred to as lawyers. As the founders of the synagogue and the teachers of Israel, they were predominantly Pharisaical in their political outlook. Their calling consisted of three tasks: They preserved the law, transmitted the law, and administered the law. They were the professional students of the law and its defenders, especially in the Hellenistic period, when the priesthood had become corrupt. They transmitted unwritten legal decisions which had come into existence in their efforts to apply the Mosaic Law to daily life. They taught the Law.² They were entrusted with the administration of the law as judges in the Sanhedrin.³ As leaders in Judaism, they had considerable prestige among the Jews, and were recognized as the scholars of religious Judaism.

Now combined, the group of the *Chief Priests* and *Scribes* in this text would have comprised the Sanhedrin which represented the judicial system of Judaism at the time of Christ. Essentially these individuals served as the Supreme Court in that day. In fact, listen to Paul's description of how these leaders would have portrayed themselves:

Romans 2:17-20, “Behold, thou art called a Jew, and retest in the law, and makest thy

¹ The following section was taken almost exclusively from The New Bible Dictionary, (Wheaton Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.) 1962

² Luke 2:46; John 18:20

³ Compare Matthew 22:35; Mark 14:43, 53; Luke 22:66; Acts 4:5; and Josephus Antiquities 18. 16f.

boast of God, And knowest *his* will, and approvest the things that are more excellent, being instructed out of the law; And art confident that thou thyself art a guide of the blind, a light of them which are in darkness, An instructor of the foolish, a teacher of babes, which hast the form of knowledge and of the truth in the law.”

Indeed, the Chief Priests and Scribes were the leaders and chief shepherds of Judaism at the time of Christ. And that is why when the question arose about a coming Messiah, Herod turned to these priests and scribes because they certainly would have known the birthplace of the King of the Jews. Thus we read these words:

Matthew 2:4-6, “And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born. And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written by the prophet, And thou Bethlehem, *in* the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel.”

Now in light of this context, we ask this question: In what way did these leaders miss Christmas? These religious leaders, scholars of God’s Word, and students of God and His covenant had both the report of the Messiah’s birth and had knowledge of its location yet they COMPLETELY IGNORED IT! We do not read that these leaders, “Made haste to arrive at the birth place of their Lord.” We don’t even read that they sent representatives!

Christ was born just a few miles from Jerusalem and these “leaders” never bothered to walk this short distance to find out for themselves if the Messiah indeed had been born! And thus they missed Christmas. Why?

Pride Caused Their Neglect

Matthew 2:1-2, “Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him.”

This passage contains the reason for the Scribes’ and Priests’ neglect: The Magi! The term *magi* or *wise men* first appears in history in the seventh century BC as a tribe within the Median nation in eastern Mesopotamia. The name magi soon came to be associated solely with the hereditary priesthood within that tribe. Because of their combined knowledge of science, agriculture, mathematics, history, and the occult, their religious and political influence continued to grow until they became the most prominent and powerful group of advisors in the Babylonian and Medo-Persian empires. In fact, no Persian could become king without mastering the scientific and religious disciplines of the magi and then being approved and crowned by them.

We learn from the book of Daniel that the magi were among the highest-ranking officials in Babylon.⁴ During both the Greek and Roman empires, the magi’s power and influence

⁴ Compare Daniel 1:20; 2:27; 5:15

continued in the eastern provinces, particularly in Parthia.

In essence the magi were pagan priests. They were skilled in astronomy and astrology, employing fire as their primary means of worship. And though they had a sacrificial system that somewhat resembled the Old Testament and were monotheists, the magi would have been considered by the Jews to be participants in a pagan religion which ultimately worshipped Satan!

As I have said, the closest modern counterpart of the Magi today would be a participant in the New Age movement.

Now it was a group of these wise men –magi—that came to Jerusalem and wandered throughout its streets inquiring as to where the King of the Jews had been born. And so why didn't the Jews heed the magi's words? Why did these Scribes and Priests miss Christ's birth?

Based on what we have seen this morning, the answer should be obvious, the reason that the Scribes and Priests didn't heed the advice of these blind, spiritually darkened, magi who worshipped the stars was that the Scribes and priests were the leaders of Israel. Why didn't they drop everything and race to Bethlehem to see the Messiah, because the Scribes and Priests were the teachers of God's law and the light of the nations and they did not need to be told about God from some pagans. These men were the correctors of the foolish (which was another name for Gentile). What knowledge could the magi possibly have added that would have advanced the Jewish understanding of Messiah? Truly, the Scribes and Pharisees of this passage missed Christmas on account of their PRIDE!

Their haughty position in Israel didn't allow them to learn from any who were perceived to be "beneath" them! If you think this is far fetched please look at the book of John with me.

The Man Born Blind

John 9:1-34, contains the account of the healed blind man before the Pharisees of his day. In John 9:1-12, Christ healed this blind man with clay on the Sabbath. In John 9:13-34, the Pharisees have brought this blind man before them in order to discount the people's claim that Christ healed him. The text progresses with question after question from the Pharisees, and the man responding thus: "I was born blind. Now I see. This man therefore must be a prophet."

Notice how this account ends after the Pharisees kept asking questions with the goal of convicting Christ. The blind man — and thus, an *uneducated man* — began indicting these Jewish leaders for their unbelief!

John 9:30-33, "The man answered and said unto them, Why herein is a marvelous thing, that ye know not from whence he is, and yet he hath opened mine eyes. Now we know that God heareth not sinners: but if any man be a worshipper of God, and doeth his will, him he heareth. Since the world began was it not heard that any man opened the eyes of one that was born blind."

Now notice the response of the Pharisees:

John 9:34, “They [the Pharisees] answered and said unto him, Thou wast altogether born in sins, and dost thou teach us? And they cast him out[of the synagogue].”

The significance of this passage lies in the fact that if we placed the Magi’s witness next to the witness of this man born blind, the man born blind would have been more credible! And yet, the Pharisees cringed at the thought of being taught by such a “simpleton!” Is it any wonder then that the religious leaders of Christ’s day missed Christmas? Their perceived position didn’t allow them to heed the message of the magi. Their PRIDE proved to be their undoing.

Brothers and sisters, will pride be our “undoing” when it comes to our relationship with Christ? In Scripture, pride is defined as thinking too highly of ourselves. Pride is thinking ourselves to be better, of more importance, of higher value than we really are.

Thus I ask again: Will our propensity to think of ourselves more highly than we ought to think cause us to miss the boat when it comes to our relationship with Christ? Will our propensity to think of others lower than they really are cause us to miss the boat when it comes to our relationship with Christ?

There are not many sins that can mess up our walk with Christ as can pride.

Psalm 51:17, “The sacrifices of God *are* a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.”

James 4:6, “But he giveth more grace. Wherefore he saith, God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble.”

Pride speaks of allegiance. Unlike most acts of sin, pride speaks of a commitment to self — and not God. It causes us to lean and rely upon self rather than God. So notice the proud sinner/church/world when he sins what does he do? He runs and hides. He labors to make up for it. He turns toward his religious devotion and denies his pride.

Yet, what does a broken sinner do with his sin? Luke shows us by way of the tax collector when he calls upon Christ to “be merciful to me, the sinner!” (Luke 18:13).

The sinner RUNS TO CHRIST!

Family of God, let us this morning run to Christ!

Yet, you say, “but I am so wicked, and unworthy! And I’ll probably just go and sin again!”

Listen, based on our passage, if you refuse to come to Christ, it is not because of these things, but ultimately pride! Don’t let your pride stand in the way of fellowshiping with your Savior!

Let us pray with the Puritans this prayer:

“O Lord, bend my hands and cut them off, for I have often struck thee with a wayward

will, when these fingers should embrace thee by faith. I am not yet weaned from all created glory, honour, wisdom, and esteem of others, for I have a secret motive to eye my name in all I do. Let me not only speak the word sin, but see the thing itself. Give me to view a discovered sinfulness, to know that though my sins are crucified they are never wholly mortified. Hatred, malice, ill-will, vain-glory that hungers for and hunts after man's approval and applause, all are crucified, forgiven, but they rise again in my sinful heart. O my crucified but never wholly mortified sinfulness! O my life-long damage and daily shame! O my indwelling and besetting sins! O the tormenting slavery of a sinful heart! Destroy, O God, the dark guest within whose hidden presence makes my life a hell."⁵

Let us long to be abased, that in losing ourselves we may gain Christ!

As we close this series let us not leave here without confessing our inclination toward pride and conceit. Let us ask God to humble us. Let us cling evermore to the cross of Christ by which God lifts us to the heights of His throne! For it is only when we are at the end of ourselves that we arrive at the shores of God's fellowship!

⁵ Quoted in *The Valley of Vision*, page 71

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About the Preacher

Greg Thurston preached this sermon on December 26, 2004. Greg is the preacher at Broomfield Presbyterian Church.