

Broomfield



PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH MINISTRY OF THE WORD

Volume 3 Issue 48

December 5, 2004

Those Who Miss Christmas

The city was London and the date was sometime in the 1500's. The priory of Saint Mary of Bethlehem – which formerly had been a hospital for the sick and dying – became a city-run insane asylum. To raise money for this “ministry” a small admission price was charged for any who wanted to go inside and heckle the inmates. Not surprisingly, this became one of the most famous tourist attractions in the city. Now because the name *Saint Mary of Bethlehem* was rather long and bulky, the name was shortened to *Bethlehem* – which was pronounced *bedlam*. In time, *bedlam* came to refer to the noise and confusion that symbolized an insane asylum.

In the Bible, Bethlehem is known as the birthplace of our Savior. It is the place where God condescended to our level. It is where Jesus became man. It is the city where the eternal intersected with the temporal! It is where the Rich became Poor, that we through His poverty might become rich.¹

Yet in our day what occurred in Bethlehem 2000 years ago has become the center of the most profitable holiday of the year.² And for many in our society Christmas has become the source of untold heartache and misery as the shopping days disappear. Depression sets in when all the money is depleted. Often when the relatives get together some feel ostracized and left out of the conversations. Marriages are more and more placed under the strain of the holidays because of the busyness of this time of year. It is at this time of year that more people suffer nervous breakdowns than at any other time of the year. No wonder many of us find the season to be little more than bedlam!

And yet, it isn't as though the first Christmas was any less of a bedlam than today. Dr. John MacArthur wrote these words:

“One thing hasn't changed since the time of Joseph and Mary: nearly everyone missed that first Christmas, too. Like people today, they were busy, consumed with all kinds of

¹ Compare 2 Corinthians 8:9

² *Note: Just in wrapping paper and tape alone, our society will spend hundreds of thousands of dollars this coming month.

things — some important, some not — but nearly everyone missed Christ.”³

In the coming weeks I want to look at four or five types of people who missed the birth of Christ. People who could have participated in one of the most important acts of God on this earth, yet for a variety of reasons chose to miss this event! To think that these four or five types of people are different from people today is to fool ourselves. Each person surrounding the birth of Christ has a counterpart today that we can discover by looking at the mirror of God's Word. Notice the first people who missed Christ's birth.

The Self-Absorbed

Luke 2:1-7, “And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. (*And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.*) And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:) To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child. And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.”

These verses detail the events of the first Christmas day. Note the peculiarity of that first Christmas: there were no midwives, nurses, obstetricians, relatives, or friends. The Bible doesn't even mention that Joseph was present. Mary was left alone to birth, clean, swaddle, and lay Christ in the manger.

Luke 2:7, “And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.”

This verse is explicitly concerned with a lonely birth!⁴ G. Campbell Morgan commenting on this verse wrote the following:

“The method of the writer is very distinct. She with her own hands wrapped the Baby round with those swaddling clothes, and laid Him in a manger. There was no one to do it for her.”⁵

Dr. John MacArthur put it this way:

“Mary brought forth the child, *she* wrapped Him in swaddling cloth, and *she* laid Him in a manger! Where usually a midwife would clean the baby and wrap him, there was no one. Mary did it herself. And where usually there would have been a cradle or basket for

³ Dr. John MacArthur, *God With Us*, page 65

⁴ See Morris's commentary on *Luke*, *The New Testament Commentary*, Page 92

⁵ G. Campbell Morgan, *The Gospel According to Luke*, page 36

the baby, there was none. Mary had to put Him in an animal's feeding trough.”⁶

Now, if you are at all familiar with the Jewish culture of the first century, this is shocking! Where was everybody? See Israel was NOT a people who sent their women off into the wilderness to labor and birth alone. Rather Israel was a compassionate people who, because of the covenant community, cared deeply about human life, and thus would rarely have left a young girl to give birth by herself. In fact, childbirth was such an important part of the Jewish culture that according to the Mishnah it was lawful to break the Sabbath and call a midwife when a woman went into labor.⁷ Indeed! The circumstances of Luke 2:7 are highly unusual!

Where was the midwife? Where was the nurse? Where was anyone who cared? How could this young girl have been abandoned to labor and birth alone? In fact, while Scripture doesn't specifically mention him, that night in Bethlehem an innkeeper was directly confronted by a man and his pregnant wife, and he turned them away! Why? What could possibly have made a typically warm and generous people toward their own neglect a woman in such great need?

They Neglected Christ

Luke 2:1-3, “And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. (*And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.*) And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city.”

From history we know that Rome had a rather peculiar way of dealing with its conquered kingdoms: they charged them for the battle. And so because of this practice, a whole system was developed in which “employees” of Rome — called tax collectors — collected the required taxes of a certain area and submitted them to Rome.

However, this raised a question, how much should a region be taxed?

The answer was this: each region should be taxed according to its population. And so, as was the policy of Rome, a census of a region was to be conducted every fourteen years for the purposes of taxation. Now while there were a variety of ways in which Rome determined the population of a certain region, one way was to require everyone to travel to their patriarch's city⁸ — which in the case of Bethlehem was the city of David.

As a result of this taxing census, Bethlehem would have been crowded and overflowing not only with those whose lineage went back to this town because their ancestry went back to David, but also with the Roman officials and soldiers charged with taking the census. And thus, in the

⁶ Ibid., page 67

⁷ “And they do deliver the young of a woman on the Sabbath. They call a midwife for her from a distant place, and they violate the Sabbath on her [the woman in childbirth's] account. And they tie the umbilical cord. F.R. Yose says, 'Also: They cut it.' And all things required for circumcision do they perform on the Sabbath.” (Jacob Neusner, *The Mishnah A New Translation*, The Second Division, Sabbath, 18:3, [New Haven & London: Yale University Press] 1988)

⁸ This was the practice that was used to determine the population of Egypt. See A. Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, page 271

hustle and bustle of trying to find housing, secure food, and keep the family together a young woman with child would have been the least of ones concerns. From the perspective of the inn keeper – who himself would have been over-burdened with the responsibilities that accompanied a full inn – Joseph's and Mary's predicament would have seemed trivial.

And so, why did the people of Bethlehem neglect this poor woman? Because, they were simply too busy. They were too preoccupied. They were too self-absorbed. And because of this they neglected to care about a young girl about to give birth. And because they were self-absorbed, they missed participating in one of the most significant acts of redemptive history — next to Christ's resurrection — Christ's birth. They missed beholding the start of a new era. They missed Christmas!

And yet, this wasn't the first time someone missed Christ and His Kingdom on account of self-absorption! Nor would it be the last.

Self-absorbed Saul

There are few in Scripture who missed the mark as did Saul. Saul was a chosen instrument of God, called to lead God's inheritance — His people.⁹ As you know, the position of covenant head was one of the most important and highly prized positions in the Old Testament for in it a man shepherded and cared for God's people. Imagine therefore how important and crucial that this new position of King would have been. The King not only was to oversee his own household but he also was to shepherd the nation.¹⁰

And yet, rather than spending his life caring for God's inheritance, Saul spent his life fighting for that which already was his by calling. Thus, he wasted his men, money, time and energy because he was self absorbed in trying to kill a man who already knew that God had made Saul King! After David let Saul escape from him the first time we read this:

1 Samuel 24:6-7, “And he said unto his men, The LORD forbid that I should do this thing unto my master, the LORD'S anointed, to stretch forth mine hand against him, seeing he *is* the anointed of the LORD. So David stayed his servants with these words, and suffered them not to rise against Saul. But Saul rose up out of the cave, and went on *his way*.”

Why did Saul spend his life chasing after David? Had David threatened him? Did David marshal and army to take over the kingdom? NO! Rather we read this about Saul — early on in Saul's reign:

1 Samuel 18:6-9, “And it came to pass as they came, when David was returned from the slaughter of the Philistine, that the women came out of all cities of Israel, singing and dancing, to meet king Saul, with tabrets, with joy, and with instruments of musick. And the women answered *one another* as they played, and said, Saul hath slain his thousands,

⁹ 1 Samuel 10:1

¹⁰ Compare 2 Samuel 5:1; 1 Kings 22:17; Jeremiah 3:15

and David his ten thousands. And Saul was very wrath, and the saying displeased him; and he said, They have ascribed unto David ten thousands, and to me they have ascribed *but* thousands: and *what* can he have more but the kingdom? **And Saul eyed David from that day and forward.”**

Saul's wasted and pitiful life was the result of his own self-absorption! Saul couldn't stand to have another praised more highly. Saul couldn't stand not being the most important fellow. Saul wanted to be the center of attention. Saul craved the focus of every man's eyes. And thus, rather than serving God as he had been called and commissioned to do, Saul stands as one who missed Christ and His kingdom on account of his self-absorbed life.

How many this day stand in the same shoes as Saul? How many of us are like the inhabitants of Bethlehem? How many of us have a preoccupation with self? How many of us are absorbed by our worries, burdens and concerns?

Two thousand years ago God came to a people who had been longing and waiting for His arrival—the incarnation of Christ was the fulfillment of all that the people had hoped for since the time of Adam and Eve.¹¹ Yet, the entire nation missed Him!

Why?

God had not failed to warn His people that Christ would come. The prophecies were clear about this. God had not withheld His word from His people because they had the Scriptures. Rather, it was because at that time and place, the people of God were too self-absorbed to notice any miracle of God — let alone the incarnation! The self-absorbed are the ones who miss Christ.

Our Natural Tendency

The natural tendency when hearing a message like this is to resolve in your heart to not miss the Christ of Christmas *this year*. We resolve to spend this month really focusing upon Christ.

Yet, let us not play games with ourselves. Christ has already come! And thus, the time to be concerned about missing Him is not just one day out of the year, or even one month out of the year. But we need Christ every moment of our lives!

See, just like Saul, each and every one of us here this day has been entrusted by God with a stewardship. In the stewardship of the call of salvation we are called to be holy, undefiled, devoted to God. We are called to be a people of prayer. We are called to be a people of the Word. We are called to be a people of God's glory and praise.

We are given the stewardship of responsibility. The call of responsibility calls us to be faithful to the specific call that God has placed on our lives. We are called to be responsible husbands and wives. We are called to be responsible singles. We are called to be responsible parents and children. We are called to responsibility in every area of our lives whether we are workers,

¹¹ Compare Genesis 3:15; and 4:1

students or bosses. And yet sadly — just like Saul — we get side-tracked into looking out for ourselves instead of fulfilling God's call. And thus, just like the inhabitants of Bethlehem we miss God's workings and moving.

Don't Cast Stones

Now don't pick up your stones yet. I'm not suggesting that we do away with Christmas. In fact, Christmas is a great opportunity for ministry both in our homes and in the church — and as such ought to be utilized for the Lord.

Think about it. I'm taking a break from our series in Samuel to preach a series about Christmas. So I'm clearly not against Christmas as such. However there is an issue that we must not miss here. Would you agree that family traditions — like birthday celebrations, anniversaries, graduations, and reunions are all fine as long as they don't cause us to compromise our walks with God?

Accordingly, let us enjoy the tradition of Christmas but let us do so in such a way that does not cause us to compromise our walks with the Lord. This is the issue that we must deal with each day.

During the next month we will be most prone to argue with our spouse. We will know stress, pressure, and the need to conform. We will divide with family over issues like Santa Clause, trees, presents, and how to celebrate. All these are issues that are quite irrelevant to the Kingdom of God.

Paul gave us an exhortation which certainly would apply to Christmas.

Colossians 2:8, “Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ.”

We must beware of our willingness to go into debt to appease those who receive our gifts. We must be cautious about our feelings that we need to keep up with the Jones — all in the name of Christ! We must beware that we don't completely miss the essence and purpose for which Christ came to this earth — that we might be a people wholly devoted to the Lord, zealous for good deeds, and that we might extend God's grace to others! Let us live by grace in and through all things. Let us live righteously, joyously. Let us know the peace with God!

And why is that?

Because like those at the time of Christ, over the next few weeks the temptation will be to be absorbed with ourselves and what we must have/do/experience for this to be the perfect census/Christmas!

The inn-keeper missed Christ not because of sin. He missed Christ because he was absorbed with the things of this life such that he couldn't take the time to notice that God was doing a

marvelous thing in his day.

May we not — in the name of Christmas — do the same!

In fact let me be rather radical this morning. I would suggest to you that God doesn't care how you celebrate December 25th, or even if you celebrate December 25th. However, He does care if we love Him more than life. He cares if we are growing in our satisfaction with Him. He cares how we use our money. He cares when we are angry or covetous. To forfeit undistracted devotion to the Lord on account of Christmas, is to miss the Christ of Christmas!

So indeed, let us enjoy the holy-day we call Christmas. But let us not in our self-absorption miss Christ!

Subscription Information

A subscription to the *Broomfield Presbyterian Church Ministry of the Word* is on a free basis. To subscribe or unsubscribe send a post card to *Broomfield Presbyterian Church Ministry of the Word*®, Post Office Box 691, Windsor, Colorado 80550. Or you may send your request by email to [Nels Nelson](mailto:Nels.Nelson@broomfieldopc.org). *The Broomfield Presbyterian Church Ministry of the Word* is published regularly.

VISIT US WHEN IN Broomfield, COLORADO

Feel free to visit Broomfield Presbyterian Church when in Broomfield, Colorado. Broomfield Presbyterian Church is located at Kohl Elementary School, 10th Street and Kohl, Broomfield, Colorado. The telephone number of the church is 303-469-6912. The worship services are at 9:30 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. each Sunday. Broomfield Presbyterian Church is a member of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

All our sermons can be accessed via the World Wide Web. The recording for this sermon is garbled. The web address for all sermons at Broomfield can be found out as follows:

<http://broomfieldopc.sermonaudio.com>

About the Preacher

Greg Thurston preached this sermon on December 5, 2004. Greg is the preacher at Broomfield Presbyterian Church.