

## **Don't Miss Christmas**

**December 24, 2019**

Each year, we hear stories about people that miss Christmas with their families. Some are serving in the military and at Christmas they can't be with their wives and children. Others are traveling and because of weather or flight delays, they end up spending Christmas in an airport. Every year, some people will miss Christmas.

While some people miss Christmas for obvious logistical reasons, many more miss Christmas in much subtler ways. This evening, we will see how it is easy to miss Christmas even when it is taking place right under your nose.

As Christians, we know Christmas is about the birth of Jesus. It is about God fusing himself with humanity to save us from our sin and make us the most blessed beings in the universe. That is something worth celebrating. This month, as we learned from the book of Hebrews, Jesus is greater than everything God did for his people in the past. Jesus is so great there is nothing more God can do for us in the future other than what he has already done for us through Jesus. That is why the birth of Jesus is worth celebrating.

As Christians, even though we know Christmas is all about Jesus, it is easy for us to let the celebration of Christmas distract us to the point that we are so busy celebrating Christmas that we miss the Jesus of Christmas. Let me show you what I mean.

### **Christmas traditions can cause us to miss Christmas.**

Let's start with the date of Christmas. Where did it come from? Why do we celebrate Christmas on December 25?

Around 350 A.D., the leader of the church in Jerusalem wrote a letter to the leader of the church in Rome. In the letter he said he wanted to find the date of Jesus' birth so they could establish a yearly celebration. Unfortunately, nobody knew when Jesus was born. The leader of the church in Rome sent back the suggested date of December 25. From that point forward, we have celebrated Christmas on that date. The problem with that date is Bible scholars tell us there is no evidence that Jesus was born on December 25. In fact, the evidence we do have from the Bible tells us December is not the right time of year for Jesus' birth.

Why did the leader of the church in Rome come up with a date for Jesus' birth of December 25? He gave it that date so Jesus' birth would compete with a number of other pagan celebrations in Rome that were celebrated in the month of December. December was the month when winter reached its fullness and people were looking forward to the thaw, spring, and planting. In December, the Romans celebrated the festival of Saturnalia. It was worship of Saturn, who was the god of agriculture. The Romans held feasts and parties to honor Saturn in hopes that the spring thaw would come quickly and that crops could be planted. The leader of the church in Roman hoped the celebration of Jesus' birth in December would eventually become more popular than the Saturnalia festival of December. That is why he chose December 25.

There were other celebrations in December that the leader of the church in Rome hoped a celebration of Christ's birth on December 25 would replace. North of Rome in Germany, on December 22 people celebrated the festival of Yule — have you ever heard of Yuletide log? It was a feast to the gods of Odin

and Thor. The leader of Rome hoped that by celebrating Jesus' birth as December 25 the Christmas party might eventually replace the Yule party.

In England, the Druids — who worshipped demonic powers — also had a special celebration in the month of December. As part of that celebration the Druid priests gathered mistletoe from oak groves. They hung the mistletoe in homes and if two people ended up under the mistletoe at the same time, they were to embrace in friendship, even if they didn't like each other. That is how mistletoe came to be part of the Christmas season. It was a practice of the Druids, without Christian origins at all. The Yuletide log came from the Yule festival in Germany and also had nothing to do with Christ's birth.

Evergreens at Christmas time were also imported from a pagan festival. Evergreens were originally part of the Roman Saturnalia festival as the life in evergreens were a reminder the new life that came with spring planting. That is how evergreens were first associated with Christmas. Ornaments on evergreens were also originally part of the Roman Saturnalia festival in the fourth century. Amazingly, evergreens and ornaments on trees do not have a Christian origin but were brought into the celebration of Christmas. That does not make them wrong. It is just interesting to know where they came from and how they became part of Christmas.

The first Christmas tree that was brought inside for the Christmas holiday happened in an Estonian monastery in 1441. Later, Martin Luther is credited with putting the first lights on a Christmas tree by putting candles on an evergreen tree in the 1600s. German soldiers defending Quebec during the American

Revolution brought Christmas trees to America in 1781. Since then Christmas trees have been part of Christmas in America.

We looked at how pagan celebrations became part of Christmas traditions. Let's see how things went the opposite way. How were good Christmas traditions emptied of their purpose?

Let's look at Santa Claus. Saint Nicholas was originally a white-bearded bishop of Asia Minor who lived from 270 to 343 A.D. He was famous for his generosity and giving gifts to children. St. Nicholas Day was celebrated in his honor every December 6. The Dutch helped associate St. Nicholas Day with gifts. Dutch children were to leave their wooden shoes on the porch and supposedly St. Nicholas would put gifts in them for the morning of December 6. The Dutch are also responsible for the name Santa Claus. In Dutch, St. Nicholas is pronounced Sinterklaas, from where we get Santa Claus.

Clement Moore from Troy, New York, is the one responsible for our modern day tradition of Santa with reindeer coming down a chimney. In 1823, he published a Christmas poem in his local paper called, "A Visit from St. Nicholas." We call it "Twas the Night Before Christmas." It was in this poem that the idea of the white-bearded Santa we know today —with reindeer, gifts and going down the chimney — originated.

Christmas cards began in 1846. They also didn't originally have a Christian background. In London, Sir Henry Cole was the owner of an art studio. He saw small painted cards sent to friends as a way to make money in the

holiday season. The first Christmas cards had nothing to do with Christmas on them! They were all pictures of drinking scenes celebrating the holiday season.

Our modern Christmas is a grab bag of traditions from around the world. Some Christian traditions have pagan origins while others were originally begun with good intent but drifted away from Jesus over time. I am not saying we should avoid Christmas traditions. All I am saying is it is easy for the celebration of Jesus' birth to get buried and lost in our traditions. When that happens, it is easy for us to miss Jesus at Christmas.

Missing Christ at Christmas isn't just something that can happen in our modern world. It happened at the first Christmas too. Let's go back to our Bibles and I will show you.

### **The innkeeper missed Christmas because he was too busy.**

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. Luke 2:1–7 (ESV)

The first person to miss Christmas was the innkeeper. The first Christmas was right in front of him, but he missed it. He had a pregnant woman and her husband, but he had no room for them. He missed the opportunity to help Mary when she gave birth to Jesus, and he missed the first Christmas.

The last verse tells us Mary had a lonely birth. It says "She gave birth to her firstborn son." Notice, it doesn't mention Joseph. Maybe he was not there. Maybe he had gone to get help. It looks like Mary gave birth to her own child. It

says she wrapped him in swaddling cloths right after his birth. Where were the midwives? Where were the people who were supposed to help? Where was the innkeeper? Of all the hours to need help, I think giving birth to your first child has to be at the top of the list. Nobody was there to help Mary. It appears that everyone missed that first Christmas.

Some people think Jesus was born in a stable. We have pictures of little lean-tos with animals under them on our Christmas cards. Other people think Jesus was born in a cave. The Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem is built over a cave where it is believed Jesus was born. In truth, just as nobody knows exactly when Jesus was born, nobody knows exactly where Jesus was born.

Incidentally, the word for inn is not the normal word for inn. The word for inn can be used to speak of a guest room in a house. Some people think Mary and Joseph were planning to stay with relatives in Bethlehem but their guest room was already taken. Imagine being pushed out in the cold by your own relatives when you are nine months pregnant because there is literally no room.

If it was an innkeeper who owned an ancient version of Holiday Inn or a relative, we don't know. If Jesus was born in a cave or in a wooden shelter, we don't know. What we do know is the innkeeper missed the first Christmas.

Why did he miss Christmas?

He was busy. The census brought many to Bethlehem. The innkeeper wasn't hostile to Jesus. He was just too busy with the season to celebrate the birth of Jesus.

A lot of us are like modern innkeepers today. We are so busy with the season, that we miss the birth of Jesus. A lot of us miss Jesus at Christmas because we are too busy. We have gifts to purchase, cards to write, holiday meals to prepare, cookies to bake, and parties to attend. Before long, we are modern day innkeepers who are too busy to stop to celebrate the birth of Jesus in the Christmas season.

Is that you this Christmas? Do you find yourself too busy? If that is you, tonight I want to give you the freedom to slow down from the worries and activities of the season. From the bottom of your heart, take time tonight to thank God for sending his son to save you from sin and give you eternal life. Remember that Jesus took on human flesh forever to save us from our sin forever. Don't let all the hospitality of the Christmas season cause you to miss the most important gift of the season — Jesus was born.

### **Herod missed Christmas because he wanted to be king of his own life.**

Another character in the Christmas story who missed that first Christmas was Herod.

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him... Matthew 2:1–3 (ESV)

Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him." Matthew 2:7–8 (ESV)

Herod pretended to care about the birth of Jesus, but he didn't want to worship Jesus. He wanted to get rid of Jesus. He wanted Jesus out of his life.

Why was Herod so opposed to Jesus? Jesus was born as king of the Jews. The problem was that Herod thought he was the king of the Jews. He didn't like the idea of competition, even if it only came from a newborn baby. In verse 3, it says Herod was troubled. That word means agitated or stirred up. Herod was in a literal panic when he heard of Jesus' birth.

Why would Herod be afraid of baby Jesus, someone the wise men said was born king of the Jews?

Herod was an Edomite. He wasn't a Jew. Herod had gained the favor of Rome. Rome trusted Herod. That is why they appointed him king of the Jews, even though he wasn't a Jew. When Herod heard a real king of the Jews was born, he panicked and tried to eliminate him because he didn't want anyone to be king in his world but him. He was so insecure as a king — because he knew he was not a legitimate king — that he killed anyone he thought would be a remote threat to his power.

For example, when Herod came to power, he murdered all the Hasmoneans. They were the sons of the Maccabees who led a revolution against the Greeks in prior generations. They had done nothing wrong. He decided to murder all of them to eliminate a potential threat to his power. Herod had 10 wives and 12 children. His most notable wife was Mariamne. She had a brother named Aristobulus, who was the high priest. Herod thought his brother-in-law Aristobulus was a threat to his power so he murdered him. He had Aristobulus over to his house for a party, and when Aristobulus dove in the swimming pool, Herod had his guards hold Aristobulus underwater until he

drowned. Later, Herod thought one of his wives was a threat to his power, so he had her killed. He thought one of his wives' mothers was a threat to his power, so he had her killed. He thought two of his sons might take the throne from him, so he killed them. Herod was afraid of anyone that might be king instead of him. This is why, when the wise men did not return and give him the location of baby Jesus, he slaughtered all of the children in that area under age two. Killing anyone that might want to be king or that could be called king was the way Herod dealt with all opposition. Thankfully, God warned Joseph to take Mary and Jesus to Bethlehem before that happened.

Why did Herod miss that first Christmas? He was afraid that Jesus would want to be the king in his world instead of him. There are many people who miss Christmas because of the same reason Herod did. Today many people pretend to celebrate Christmas but aren't celebrating the birth of the king in charge of their lives. They want to be in control of their own lives. They don't want Jesus as the king over their lives and their hearts. Like Herod, they only claim to want to celebrate Jesus' birth but they want their lives to be about their plans, their dreams, and their desires. In their lives, like Herod, they don't want anyone to be king but themselves.

They still want Jesus to help them in times of trouble. They still want Jesus to keep them out of hell. Yet, they want to be their own kings. They claim to want to celebrate Christmas, the birth of their king, but in reality they want to be master of their own fate.

This year, are you like Herod? Are you here only pretending to celebrate the birth of your king when in reality you push Jesus out of your life because you want to be in charge of your own universe? If that is you, let this Christmas be different. Let this be the first Christmas when you don't miss the birth of Jesus. Ask Jesus to be the king of your life so you no longer celebrate his birth like Herod.

The innkeeper missed Christmas because he was too busy. Herod missed Christmas because he wanted to be the only king in his life. Now we meet a third group that missed Christmas for a different reason.

**The chief priests and scribes missed Christmas because they didn't bother to check out the Jesus born under their nose.**

...and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: " 'And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.' " Matthew 2:4-6 (ESV)

When the wise men came to Herod in Jerusalem looking for Jesus after his birth, Herod called together the theological experts. These were the brightest and the smartest men. They knew the Bible inside and out. They knew where Jesus was to be born. They could quote the Scriptures about Jesus' birth from memory. Micah 5:2 told them Jesus would be born in Bethlehem. What is shocking is that they knew their Bibles well enough to tell Herod and the wise men where to Jesus would be born but they never bothered to check it out for themselves. What makes this so shocking is Bethlehem is only 2-5 miles away from Jerusalem. Bethlehem was no farther away than Milford is from Spirit Lake!

It was walking distance. They never cared enough to check out Jesus and see if he was the real deal.

Today, many people miss Christmas for the same reason. They know the truth of the Christmas story, but they don't care enough to check out the Jesus of the Christmas story for themselves. They don't care enough to see if Jesus does offer complete forgiveness. They don't care enough to do a little work to find out if Jesus can make them into new people and give them new hearts and new lives. Don't be like the chief priests and scribes this Christmas season. Don't know all the right Bible answers about the Christmas story and have Christmas being celebrated right under your nose tonight but fail to check out Jesus for yourself. The reason we celebrate the birth of Jesus is because he does save people from their sin. He does completely transform people's lives as they read their Bibles and walk with him. Don't know the Christmas story and be around people who are celebrating Christmas but fail to check out Jesus for yourself. Don't miss Jesus this Christmas.

## **Conclusion**

Each year, many people miss Christmas. Some miss Christmas because they are in the military overseas. Others miss Christmas because they are traveling and stuck in airports. As we have seen, many people miss Christmas in subtler ways.

It is easy to miss Jesus at Christmas when he gets buried in Christmas traditions like evergreens, family meals, decorating trees, the pressure of sending Christmas cards, and decorating the house. It is easy to forget to have grateful hearts to Jesus in the busyness of the season.

Some of us can miss Christmas because we are like modern day innkeepers. The busyness of the hospitality that comes with the season keeps us from hearts filled with worship of Christ in the season.

Others miss Christmas because their hearts are like Herod. They are only pretending to celebrate the birth of a king but in reality they insist on being the kings of their own lives. If Jesus is not the king of your life, don't miss Christmas like Herod missed it. This Christmas, ask Jesus to be the king of your life so you are not just pretending to celebrate his birth.

Others miss Christmas because they are like the chief priests and scribes. They know the truth of the Christmas story that happened right under their nose but they never bothered to check out Jesus for themselves. Don't let that be you this Christmas. You may know the truth of the Christmas story but if you haven't genuinely pursued knowing and following Jesus, you can miss Christmas like the chief priests and scribes did. If that is you, let this be the Christmas when you no longer miss it.

My friends, whatever your reason. Don't miss Jesus. Don't miss Christmas.



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