



Auburn Presbyterian Church

Passionately loving the Lord Jesus Christ and radiating that love to every individual

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“Who Cares About Christmas?”

Luke 1:26-38

We all have to know by now that Christmas is coming soon. The last day of school for our kids was Friday. Wednesday night at 7 p.m. we'll gather for Christmas Eve “Carols and Candlelight” here, and we will probably have a number of guests join us that night. Other Christmas events have been under way for several weeks. Last week, Sharon and I got our house decorated just in time for our Life Group to come over Monday night for dinner. I don't think I've finished my Christmas shopping yet, so I'd better get on it! A lot happens at Christmas!

One doting father asked his small daughter well in advance what she wanted for Christmas. Shyly she announced, “I'd like a baby brother.” To everyone's surprise and delight, mother returned from the hospital with a baby boy on Christmas Eve. The next year, the father repeated the question. This time, there was less hesitation. “If it wouldn't be too uncomfortable for Mommy, I would like a pony!”

With all the decorating demands and giving gifts and entertaining events, it's no wonder that the real reason for Christmas gets lost. In the middle of our preparations, it's important to renew our purpose for all of this: Jesus is the reason for the season.

But there are a lot of people who ask, why should we care about Christmas? Thursday is the celebration of the birth of a baby boy born centuries ago to poor people, half-way around the world, in a culture very different from ours. You may have a friend who says, “For what possible reason should I care about Jesus?” Or, you may be that person who asks, “Who cares?”

Now, I get that question. What counts for most of us is “here and now”, right? Well, there's plenty of “here and now” about Christmas, about Christ. And I'll agree that the only reason we care about this baby's birth is because of the adult he became, the life he lived, the death he died, his resurrection and empowerment of his followers for ministry. Without those more important things, we wouldn't care at all. But I hope this morning I can make the case for Christmas, and invite you to care about Christmas, too.

Why should we care about Christmas? If Christians are right, if we can trust the Bible, then Christmas marks the turning point of our civilization. Everything before his birth is B.C., and at and after his birth, everything is A.D.

Others have made “The Case for Christ” very well, gathering evidence from the most-recognized authorities in the world concerning Bible manuscripts and newsworthy accuracy of the Bible text. This is Lee Strobel's book, *The Case for Christ* (and if you want a copy, I have a few I can give away today). He has done a good job on this topic, and we got a lot out of reading his book together last spring. So for today I'm going to leave aside proving the reliability of Scripture, and ask you to follow along with the assumption that the Bible contains the reliable record.

Today I want to focus on some of the more pressing questions we often have—like, “Who Is Jesus?”, “Why Do We Need Him?”, and “What Did He Do For Us?” I’ll even take a moment to deal with common excuses people give for not accepting the gift God offers us in Jesus Christ. And we’ll close with God’s Word about His purpose for Christmas, many years ago. Let’s dig in!

Who Is Jesus? According to the Bible, Jesus is the Son of God. He claimed to be the unique Son of God, on an equal footing with God. He assumed the authority to forgive sins, and authority to heal—which are often the same thing. He said one day he would judge the world, and what would count then was how each of us responded to him in this life. There’s this famous quote from C.S. Lewis I’ve always liked: “A man who was merely a man and said the things that Jesus said wouldn’t be a great moral teacher [as some people think—he’d be] on the level with a man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the devil of hell [and the Father of Lies]. You must make your choice. Either this man was and is the Son of God, or a madman, or something worse. . . . But don’t let’s come up with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He hasn’t left that open to us. He didn’t intend to.” (*Mere Christianity*)

Jesus claimed to be God, and he backed that up with a uniquely selfless life, and with teaching most agree is the purest and best ever to have fallen from the lips of a man. His character backed up his claim. C.S. Lewis, again: “It seems obvious that he was neither lunatic nor fiend; and consequently, however strange or terrifying or unlikely it may seem, I have to accept the view that he was and is God. God has landed on this enemy-occupied world in human form.” (*Surprised by Joy*)

His claims, his character and also his conquest of death confirm that Jesus was, and is the Son of God. Conquest of death? Oh, yes! “Read the Book!” After he was killed as a insurrectionist by the Roman authorities bucking to pressure from the Jewish religious establishment, his disciples went to the tomb where his body had been laid, and found the grave clothes had collapsed, and Jesus’ body was gone. In the next six weeks He was seen by over 500 people on at least ten different occasions. The disciples’ lives were transformed in ways that make no sense if this was not true. The Christian church was born and grew at a powerful rate.

You know the story of the Wise Men who brought gifts to the Baby Jesus just after Christmas—gold, frankincense and myrrh? The first gift was “gold”. Nothing less than gold would be suitable for such a child.

But there’s a more personal, pointed question that comes up as we ask, “Who cares about Christmas?”—namely, “Why Do We Need Jesus? We need Him because He’s the only way to know and love God. Let me explain.

Life is really about relationships, isn’t it? The bumper sticker that says, “He who dies with the most toys, wins” is at least misleading, because the person with the most toys still dies. No, life is not about collecting toys; it’s about relationships, and Jesus was all about relationships, too. When the Wise Men brought Baby Jesus “frankincense”, they gave him a pressed plant resin that made a perfume-like cloud of smoke when used in the worship rituals of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem. The rising smoke was a way of reaching God, as we do with prayer. It was a symbol for prayer--that is, how we live out our relationship with God. Jesus himself said, he is the only way to God.

Christianity is about relationships, not rules or rituals. The Bible tells us that God sent Jesus to demonstrate what God's been urging on His people, from the beginning. Jesus is the picture of God we need to know God's character, God's values, God's desires. Jesus said the first and greatest commandment is to love God with all we've got. (Hear the "relationship" that is at the core of this?) His second commandment was for us to love our neighbor. Relationships, again.

You and I were created for a relationship with God, and until we find that, there's a "God-shaped hole" in us; we feel that something is missing in our lives. Of course, people try to fill this emptiness or sooth this loneliness with all kinds of things: money; drugs or alcohol abuse; sexual acting-out. But there are also other so-called "good" things people mis-use to try to fill that gap--things like hard work, music, sports, success. Neither the instant gratifications of the first activities nor the long-term payoffs of the second, socially-approved activities satisfy that hunger deep inside every person. Even terrific human relationships—wonderful as they are--do not full-fill this emptiness deep inside. Nothing will fill this gap except the relationship with God for which we were made. Without Jesus, we have a "holy hunger" that only he can satisfy. He's the one who said, "I am the bread of life" (John 6:35).

I want to list for you how Jesus satisfies our deepest hunger, meets our deepest needs. First, He satisfies our need for "meaning" and "purpose" in life. It takes a living relationship with our Creator-God to fulfill that need. Second, He satisfies our hunger for life beyond death. God has given us this urge to look forward—as the Bible puts it, "God has also set eternity in the hearts of men and women" (Ecclesiastes 3:11, expanded). The forward-looking urge, combined with our need for relationship with God, is just what this "eternal life" IS. Only in Jesus Christ do we find eternal life he told us himself. (By the way, one of the best-kept secrets about this "eternal life" is, you don't have to wait until after you die! You can savor little appetizers of eternity here and now, as you connect with God as Jesus showed us.

Jesus satisfies our needs for meaning and purpose, he satisfies our need for life beyond death, and he also satisfies our need for forgiveness. If we are honest, we would have to admit that we all do things we know are wrong. Sometimes we do things for which we are deeply ashamed. More than that, there is a self-centeredness about us which spoils what God created us to be. The Bible names some symptoms of this self-centeredness: evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. (Mark 7:20-23)

Yes, we need forgiveness, badly. Just as a man who has cancer needs a doctor whether he realizes it or not, so we need forgiveness whether we realize it or not. Just as with a terrible illness, the one who recognizes their need is far better off than the person who is lulled into a false sense of security that ignores the need for intervention. When the Wise Men brought frankincense, they were pointing to the way Jesus connects us with God.

Well, perhaps Jesus meets needs, but why did he come to earth? What did he really do for us? Remember that third gift of the Wise Men? Gold, frankincense, and then, myrrh. Myrrh was a spice that was used in those days to overcome the smell of dead bodies. Wealthy people put their family's bodies in family tombs carved into the rocks of the hills. When the next relative died, the bodies would be put on adjacent shelves carved into the side of the cave. If the deaths happened close together, the stench from the first person would be awful. Myrrh was a way to overpower that smell of death, and applying it in burial was the final act of love that

could be done for a person, right after they died. So myrrh points to death. What an odd thing to bring to a baby!

Jesus said he came to die for us. “The Son of Man [came] . . . to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45) Jesus gave up his life for us—and that’s the supreme reason we give gifts at Christmas—to imitate, in just a little way, the gift Jesus gave us. Jesus said he died for us. The word “for” in Greek means, “in place of.” Jesus loves us and did not want us to have to pay the penalty for all the things we have done wrong, and all the right things we have not done at all. On the cross, He was effectively saying, “I will take all those wrong things on myself.” It was out of love that He gave his life as a ransom. The word “ransom” comes from the slave market. Someone wanting to perform a generous, good deed would sometimes buy a slave and then set him or her free—but first the ransom price had to be paid. Jesus paid, by dying on the cross, the ransom price to set us free.

Free from—*what*, exactly? Freedom from guilt, freedom from our addiction to “self”, and freedom from fear; freedom to know God personally; freedom to love; and freedom to change. Let that sink in for a moment. Which of these stand out for you?

Hearing about this incredible offer from God to overcome the separation we have caused by living without Him, it’s rather amazing, isn’t it, that many people will refuse that gift. Some will say, quite openly, “I have no need of God.” And they may try to imply that you are weak, if you say you do.

What people mean when they say this is that they are quite happy without God. What they fail to understand is that the point of life is not happiness, but forgiveness. It takes a very proud person to say that they don’t need forgiveness. The Bible shows us that God is indeed a loving Father. But the Bible also shows us that God is a righteous Judge. We are in deep trouble if we do not accept this offer of being ransomed and starting a new life with God!

Others will be brutally honest about themselves and admit, the price is too high; there is too much good stuff to give up. But they don’t yet see that what we gain is far more than what we give up. And it must be insulting to God for us to assume that God wants to ruin our fun. Think about it: if I had young children who were playing with a carving knife, I would take it away—not because I want to ruin their fun, but because I don’t want them to get hurt. God is the same way.

Still others will hold back, saying, “There must be a catch. There is no such thing as a free lunch. This offer of free forgiveness is too good to be true.” No, there’s no catch. Though forgiveness is free for us, we have to remember it was not free for Jesus. Forgiveness for us cost him everything. Everything.

Some folks—more than you might expect—will hold back because they feel they are not good enough. And they’re right—they’re not. Nor am I. Nor are you. None of us can be good enough to earn a friendship with God. But that’s why Jesus came. He made it possible for God to accept us just as we are, no matter what we have done, no matter what a mess we have made of our lives.

And you may have known people who held back, saying, “I could never keep it up.” And that’s true—*on our own*, we cannot live and love as God wants. But God gives us His Holy

Spirit to live in us and through us, giving us the power to change. The difference in the lives of people who have turned from their self-centered lives and become followers of Jesus—it's a stack of amazing stories.

And one of the worst excuses people give for not taking God's offer of forgiveness is: "I'll do it later." "When I get around to it--you know, later." But will our delay make it *too late*?? The longer we put it off, the harder it becomes, and the more we miss out. Please get this: eternal life is not just after we die; it's here and now as well. I've been cheered immensely by some of the men I'm working with these days who are discovering changes in themselves since they have committed to grow closer to God with me. One said to me this week, "Why did I have to wait until I was 70 in order to learn this [about God and my life]?" But if you never begin, you may run out of time. Why not do it now?

What do we have to DO to start this new life with God? Basically, we talk with God, and we say three things: "Sorry. Thank You. Please." "

If that's something you want to do this morning, then silently speak to God with these words as I lead:

"I'm sorry, God, for having lived my life without You." *[And you might add any of the specific things you've done for which you know you need forgiveness.]///*

"Thank You, God, for loving me so much that You would die for me on the Cross, and free me from my addiction to self." *//////*

"Please come into my heart by the Holy Spirit, to be with me forever, and lead me into a new life with You." *////* Thank You, Lord Jesus.

As we get ready to celebrate the coming of God's Son to live his life among us, I pray that this will be a new birth of God in you, too. I hope you now care about Christmas, more than ever, and how it's God's best gift to us.

Hear God's Christmas Word from Luke: *[text Luke 1:26-38]*

If you have prayed with me this morning, I want to know about it, so that I can help you take your first steps with God into this new life you've begun. May Christmas this year mark a new life for you where you are getting ready to say, "I am the Lord's servant."

Please talk to me—write out your name and phone number so I can get in touch, and give me that paper at the door. For you, especially: Merry Christmas!

(credit: adapted from "Why Christmas?"—the Christmas edition of "Why Jesus?" by Nicky Gumbel, Colorado Springs, Cook Ministry Resources, 1991, 1997)