

Week 15: Christmas



Main Point: Share the message of Jesus this Christmas.

The first Christmas card was an invention of necessity. It was the Christmas season of 1843, and Henry Cole, a prominent educator and patron of the arts, had a problem – he had received a substantial number of hand-written Christmas letters but had no time to return the kindness. Instead of penning each correspondence himself, he set out to create a Christmas greeting that he could mass produce.

Cole had an artist design a scene featuring a family eating Christmas dinner, flanked on either side by folks demonstrating generosity to the poor. The greeting read, “A Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year to You.” The image was printed and sent to 1,000 of Cole’s dearest friends.

The modern Christmas card industry began in 1915 when the Hall Brothers postcard company (now Hallmark) designed a new format for Christmas cards – 4 inches wide, 6 inches high with a fold in the middle. Today, approximately 1.3 billion Christmas cards are sent annually in the United States, making Christmas the highest-volume card-sending holiday in the country.¹ Hallmark alone offers more than 2,000 card designs for Christmas cards; 1977’s “Three Little Angels” is the all-time best-selling Christmas card, featuring the greeting “God bless you, love you, keep you ... at Christmas time and always.”²

Q: Do you send Christmas cards? Why or why not?

Q: Have you ever designed a Christmas card? What message did you put on it?

Q: When you purchase a Christmas card, do you typically take your time? Do you try to find a card with just the right message?

Transition: Thousands of Christmas card designs provide us with an opportunity to express our sentiments and perspective regarding Christmas. Today, we will look at three presentations of the Christmas story, each focusing on particular elements of Christmas that the Spirit led that author to share.

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Book

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Matthew 1:1, 18–25 [Read]

Talking Point 1: Matthew's perspective.

It's finally happened – the prophecies have been fulfilled! God's people had received incredible promises from Him regarding their future. These promises served as bastions of hope during dark times – through seasons of exile, death and oppression. Matthew reminds his readers of two of the most fantastic promises that the Lord had made: 1. He would send His chosen people a rescuer (the promised Messiah), and 2. The Jewish people would bless the entire world. Jesus is the fulfillment of both of these promises.

Promise #1 – Jesus is the son of David, the rescuer, the Messiah (Matthew 1:1)

God made a covenant with David that he would father a line of kings that would never end (2 Samuel 7:16). Additionally, the kingdom would last forever (2 Samuel 23:5) and David's line would culminate with a divine king (the Messiah) who would rule all and maintain His throne for eternity (Isaiah 9:1–7; 11:1–5; Jeremiah 30:4–11; Ezekiel 34:23–24). In his role as Messiah, this revolutionary leader would bring freedom and establish a kingdom that would change the world. Jesus' title as "son of David" makes Him eligible to fulfill this prophecy.

Promise #2 – Jesus is the son of Abraham and the way by which the line of Abraham blesses the world (Matthew 1:1).

God first established His covenant with Abraham in Genesis 12:2–3, "*... in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.*" Like many Old Testament promises, it's only through the lens of the New Testament that we can fully understand the implications of this covenant. Paul illuminates us in Galatians 3:8 and 3:16:

⁸ And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "In you shall all the nations be blessed."

¹⁶ Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, "And to offsprings," referring to many, but referring to one, "And to your offspring," who is Christ.

Jesus is the means by which the line of Abraham blesses the world, offering salvation not just to Jewish people but also Gentiles. Jesus is a gift to the world.

Matthew uses a genealogy in verses 2–17 to prove that Jesus has the correct ancestry to fulfill these two promises. In addition to demonstrating Jesus' rightful claim to the role of Messiah and blessing to the nations, the genealogy also reflects the ministry Jesus would provide. He would call men and women, Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor, powerful and lowly to repentance and a new identity in His kingdom.

With Jesus' qualifications established, Matthew turns to the birth of Christ. We learn several vital pieces of information:

- Mary remained faithful to Joseph.
- Jesus' conception came about through a work of the Holy Spirit within Mary.
- God had a plan for Joseph and wanted him to follow through with the marriage.
- The marriage would legally make the child a "son of David."³

Something striking in the angel's conversation with Joseph is the child's naming – God had something specific in mind. The boy's name will be Jesus, meaning "the Lord saves."⁴ His name tells us what Jesus will do as the Messiah. He will liberate His people, not simply from an earthly Enemy but from sin itself (v. 21).

Matthew also gives us one of Jesus' titles: *Immanuel*, meaning "God with us." The people had been promised the Immanuel in Isaiah 7:14; that promise finds its fulfillment in Jesus. God is not far off, an aloof deity or king. He is present with His people. God didn't just send a rescue. He *is* the rescue!

Q: Based on what we discussed, if you were writing a one-sentence Christmas card on Matthew's behalf, what would it say?

Q: How has Jesus blessed your life? How has he specifically blessed your life this past year?

Q: Why are Old Testament prophecies helpful (specifically to Jewish readers)?

Q: What inclusions in Matthew's recounting of Jesus' genealogy and birth story might be surprising to a Jewish reader?

Read: Luke 1:26–33, 2:1–7

Talking Point 2: Luke's perspective.

Luke's primary concern in giving his account of the Gospel is to demonstrate the truth of the matter from a historical perspective, and to convince readers that this is a trustworthy account. Rather than expound, Luke is insistent in cutting to the core of the matter, while clarifying and simplifying his work. The book of Luke is written by a man who is intent on convincing individuals through the importance of careful and orderly research.

Luke gives special attention to prophecy that had been previously mentioned throughout the words of Scripture in order to further cement the claims of his Gospel as true. The prophecies concerning the birth of Jesus and John the Baptist are told side by side to show John the Baptist's place in the birth narrative.

John the Baptist's mother physically could not have children at this point in her life. It took a miracle to accomplish what God was doing in bringing about the birth of the forerunner of Jesus. In addition, as we all know, Jesus' birth was miraculous on the other end of the spectrum. When we start to see all the intricate details of the plan of God begin to unfold, it brings a sense of majesty and awe to the birth narrative. This wasn't something that occurred by happenstance. Rather, it was carefully orchestrated throughout thousands of years as the plan of God was brought to fruition.

Luke prepares the reader for the birth of the Savior through an accurate historical account of how God prepared the way through prophecy and other individuals in the early life of Jesus. Special highlights are given in Mary's *Magnificat*, which is a song of praise that Mary sings unto God about His goodness in granting her a child. This and Zechariah's prophecy serve functionally to support the connection between God's promise to Israel and how He is fulfilling that promise through the birth of Jesus. Jesus is not only a miracle, He is a great answer to the prayers of Israel and the promise of God.

All of this preparation culminates in the real, historical event of the birth of Jesus. All that God has promised and all that these people have been preparing for has finally arrived. God was with humanity in the flesh, and He is to be worshipped. God brings in shepherds to praise this baby through supernatural intervention, showing His glory by having strangers worship Him. The person of all deserving worship and praise is with us. God is here!

Q: Based on what we discussed about Luke today, if you were to write a one-sentence Christmas card, what would it say?

Q: Why is it important that we see how God and others prepared for the arrival of our Savior?

Q: How can a close focus on historical events help us to see the Gospel in a clearer light?

John 1:1–5, 9–18 [Read]

Talking Point 3: John's perspective.

A solid theological understanding of Jesus' nature is John's concern in the first chapter of his Gospel. We certainly can appreciate the manger, Joseph, Mary, the shepherds, and the whole beautiful scene of that first Christmas, but if we miss who Jesus is and why He came, we've missed everything. So John takes us back to the beginning in verses 1–5 and provides us with several pieces of essential information regarding Jesus' nature in the first sentence alone.

Jesus has always existed. Jesus doesn't have a beginning. Bethlehem was not the start of Jesus' story.

Jesus is in community with God. The relationship between the three members of the Trinity is active and intricate. They are *one*.

Jesus is God.

All things were made through Him. This fact destroys the argument that somehow God the Son was created by the other two members of the Trinity.

Jesus is life and light. Jesus' impact on humanity is profound – He is the believer's source of life and understanding of who God is. ⁵

Verse 9 enters into Jesus' life and ministry on earth. Verses 9–11 bring a melancholy to the Advent of Jesus. God arrived as his own creation in human form, yet mankind, the people He created, rejected Him. What's more tragic and personal is that God came to His own, His chosen people, born to a Jewish woman – yet the Jewish people also rejected Him. But, to those who did place their trust in Him, He welcomed them into God's forever family (vv. 12–13).

Jesus didn't fall into a purpose on earth. He arrived with intention (John 12:46; 9:39–41; 18:37; 1 Timothy 1:15). A purpose established before the foundation of the world – Jesus' life, death and Resurrection was *always* the plan (1 Peter 1:20). Jesus knew the mission He was to accomplish, including the horrific suffering and death, before He entered the scene in Bethlehem. John's description of Jesus' transition from heaven to

earth highlights Jesus' agency: "*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us*" (John 1:14).

Q: If you were writing a one-sentence Christmas card on John's behalf, how would it read?

Q: In what ways is John's description of Jesus' actions and nature before his Advent helpful?

Q: How would you differentiate John's Christmas story from Matthew and Luke's?

Week 15: Christmas

Took

Main Point: Share the message of Jesus this Christmas.

Sharing the Christmas messages of Matthew, Luke and John is always important; many might be even more receptive this year as Christmas of 2020 was a bit bleak for some. Polling at Christmas of 2020 found the following:

- 22% of Americans said they feel very or festive in 2020, down from 49% in 2019
- 50% of Americans reported feeling lonely, compared to 41% in 2019
- 52% of Americans said they're somewhat sad, 44% in 2019
- 37% of Americans felt generous, compared to 52% in 2019
- 60% said reported feeling very grateful, down from 73% in 2019⁵

Teacher, ask your LifeGroup Bible Study members to consider someone who needs to hear the life-giving message of the Gospel this Christmas. Conduct a time of prayer in which each class member prays specifically for the person they identified. Ask that they pray that the Lord would provide an opportunity to turn a Christmas conversation toward the Gospel, that their person would be receptive, and that the Lord would do a mighty work.

CHALLENGES

THINK: Based on my conversations, actions and attitudes, what am I communicating about Christmas? How would my "Christmas Greeting" read? Take time to meditate on the arrival of the Messiah and allow that to inform your focus this Christmas.

PRAY: Pray for opportunities to share the hope of Jesus this Christmas. Spend time praying for those in your life who do not know the Lord and pray that this Christmas, they may receive the gift of salvation.

ACT: Leverage your Christmas activities to constantly point to Jesus. Whether it's looking at light displays with your children or attending a Christmas party with friends, choose to turn the conversation back to Jesus.

1 <https://corporate.hallmark.com/hallmark-news/christmas-cards/>

2 <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/history-christmas-card-180957487/>

3 Blomberg, p. 59.

4 Blomberg, p. 59.

5 <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/wireStory/ap-norc-poll-virus-weary-americans-festive-year-74840877>