

'The Purpose of Christmas'

"A Time for Celebration."

Luke 2:1-11

1 At that time the Roman emperor, Augustus, decreed that a census should be taken throughout the Roman Empire. 2 (This was the first census taken when Quirinius was governor of Syria.) 3 All returned to their own towns to register for this census. 4 And because Joseph was a descendant of King David, he had to go to Bethlehem in Judea, David's ancient home. He traveled there from the village of Nazareth in Galilee. 5 He took with him Mary, his fianc'e, who was obviously pregnant by this time. 6 And while they were there, the time came for her baby to be born. 7 She gave birth to her first child, a son. She wrapped him snugly in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the village inn. 8 That night some shepherds were in the fields outside the village, guarding their flocks of sheep. 9 Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord's glory surrounded them. They were terribly frightened, 10 but the angel reassured them. "Don't be afraid!" he said. "I bring you good news of great joy for everyone! 11 The Savior -- yes, the Messiah, the Lord -- has been born tonight in Bethlehem, the city of David!

Christmas is a party. Specifically, it's a birthday party — for Jesus — and birthdays are meant to be celebrated. It's why we say "Merry Christmas!"

Ironically, at most Christmas parties the person whose birthday we're supposed to be celebrating is completely ignored. He's never even mentioned. Although Jesus is the reason for the season, he's often overlooked or merely mentioned along with Rudolph, Frosty the Snowman, Santa Claus, the Grinch, elves, and a long list of celebrated fictional characters.

A survey of Christmas shoppers indicate that their celebration had nothing to do with Jesus:

- "I'm celebrating that I made it through another year."
- "I'm celebrating being home with my family."
- "I got a Christmas bonus."
- "The candidate I voted for got elected."
- "I'm celebrating that I've finished all my shopping."
- "I'm not celebrating anything. I'm just trying to survive."

Preparing for Christmas can be a lot of work, especially for moms. With the pressure of buying gifts, sending greeting cards, decorating our homes, putting up lights, cooking, attending parties, and cleaning up afterward, we have little time to actually enjoy the meaning of Christmas.

The first purpose of Christmas is celebration! We learn this from the angel's opening statement to the shepherds of Bethlehem. God had wonderful news for us that would cause

us all to rejoice, celebrate, and throw a party: ***"I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people." Luke 2:10 (NIV)***

The good news of Christmas is worth celebrating for three reasons.

- It is personal: "I bring YOU."
- It is positive: "GOOD news of great joy."
- And it is universal: "for ALL the people." It doesn't matter who you are, what you've done, where you've been, or where you're headed — this news is for you.

The angel brought us news we can use. It's the best news in the world:

- God loves you!
- God is with you!
- God is for you!
- Christmas is a time to celebrate that God loves you!

The most famous statement in the Bible is Jesus' explanation of why God sent him to earth: ***"God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life."***

The entire reason for Christmas is **the love of God**. God loves you so much that he came to earth as a human so you could get to know him and learn to trust him and love him back. Theologians call this the Incarnation. God became one of us, a human being, so we could understand what he is really like.

God has given us, as human beings, the capacity to know him in ways animals can't. He created us in his image, which includes the ability to enjoy a personal relationship with him. Then he took the initiative to send Jesus so we could understand his love and our need for him.

We know a little about God by simply observing his creation. For instance, by looking at nature we know that our Creator loves variety: he created an incredibly diverse universe. Think of the limitless array of plants, animals, rock formations, snowflakes, and people. No two human beings, even twins, are exactly alike. God doesn't make clones or copies. Every one of us is an original. After you were born, God broke the mould.

FYNBOS: Of the world's six floral kingdoms, this is the smallest and richest per area unit. Contrast it in size with the Holarctic kingdom, which incorporates the whole of the northern hemisphere apart from the tropical regions. The diversity of fynbos plants is extremely high, with over 9000 species of plants occurring in the area, around 6200 of which are endemic, i.e. they do not grow anywhere else in the world. This level of variety is comparable to tropical rainforests or large islands and is unique in a relatively dry continental area. Of the Ericas, 600 occur in the fynbos kingdom, while only 26 are found in the rest of the world. This is in an area of 46,000 km² - by comparison, the Netherlands, with an area of 33,000 km², has 1400 species, none of them endemic. Table Mountain in Cape Town supports 2200 species,

more than the entire United Kingdom. Thus, although the Fynbos comprises only 6% of the area of southern Africa, it has half the species on the subcontinent – and in fact has almost 1 in 5 of all plant species in Africa.

By surveying natural phenomena, we also know that God is powerful and organized, and that he loves beauty. We all know that God must enjoy watching us enjoy what he's created. Otherwise, why would he give us so many ways to enjoy it? He gave us taste buds, then filled the world with incredible flavours like chocolate and cinnamon and all the other spices. He gave us eyes to perceive colour and then filled the world with a rainbow of shades. He gave us sensitive ears and then filled the world with rhythms and music. Your capacity for enjoyment is evidence of God's love for you. He could have made the world tasteless, colourless, and silent. The Bible says that God "richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment." He didn't have to do it, but he did, because he loves us.

Still, until Jesus arrived, our understanding of God's love was limited. So God invaded earth! It was the greatest invasion in history, and nothing has been the same since. God could have chosen thousands of ways to communicate with us, but since he designed us, he knew the best way to communicate with us would be face-to-face.

If God had wanted to communicate to birds, he would have become a bird. If God had wanted to communicate to cows, he would have become a cow. But God wanted to communicate to us, so he became one of us. He didn't send an angel or a prophet or a politician or an ambassador. He came himself. If you really want people to know how much you love them, you can't send a representative to communicate it. You have to say it personally. That's what God did at Christmas.

The Bible tells us that God is love. It doesn't say God has love, but God is love. Love is the essence of God's character. It is his very nature. The reason that everything in the universe exists is because God wanted to love it. "The Lord is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made."

Think about this. If God didn't want to love something, he would not have created it. Everything you see, and the trillions of things you can't see, was made by God for his enjoyment. He loves it all, even when we mess it up with our sin. He still has a purpose for it. Every star, every planet, every plant, every animal, every cell, and, most of all, every human being was created out of God's compassion.

You were created as an object of God's love. He made you in order to love you! His love is the reason you're alive and breathing. Every time your heart beats and every time you take a breath, God is saying, "I love you."

Did you know that God was thinking of you even before he made the world? In fact, it is why he created it! He designed this planet's environment with just the right characteristics so human beings could live on it. The Bible says, "God decided to give us life through the word of truth so we might be the most important of all the things he made."

Because God's love for you is unconditional, he loves you on your bad days as much as on your good days. He loves you when you don't feel his love as much as when you do. **He**

loves you regardless of your performance, your moods, your actions, or your thoughts. His love for you is unchanging. Everything else will change during your lifetime, but God's love for you is constant, steady, and continuous. It's the foundation for unshakable confidence.

There is nothing you can do that will make God stop loving you. You could try, but you'd fail — because God's love for you is based on his character, not your conduct. It's based on who he is, not what you've done. The Bible says, "Christ's love is greater than anyone can ever know, but I pray that you will be able to know that love."

One potential problem of our annual Christmas celebrations is that many people only think of Jesus as a baby! Their conception of him is only as a helpless newborn in his mother's arms. If Jesus had never grown up to do what he did, he'd have no power to transform our lives.

But the baby born in Bethlehem did not stay a baby. Jesus grew to manhood, modelled for us the kind of life that pleases God, taught us the truth, paid for every sin we commit by dying on a cross, then proved that he was God and could save us by coming back to life. This is the Good News. When the Romans nailed Jesus to a cross, they stretched his arms as wide as they could. With his arms wide open, Jesus was physically demonstrating, "I love you this much! I love you so much it hurts! I'd rather die than live without you!"

The next time you see a picture or statue of Jesus with outstretched arms on the cross, remember, he is saying, "I love you this much!"