



**RETHINKING**  
*Christmas*



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**This book belongs to**

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# 1

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## SESSION 1

# Shutting Out The Noise

## Introduction

For many, Christmas is truly wonderful, but that is not to say that it doesn't have its headaches. Traffic becomes more and more congested. People become more on edge as the demands of life intensify. Just when we're supposed to be reflecting on peace and quiet, life brings noise and anxiety. There are, of course, some fixes we can put in place to protect ourselves from the insanity of the holidays, but nothing can shut out the noise of Christmas like focusing on Jesus. When we look for Him, worship Him, and give our lives to Him, we shut out the noise of Christmas.

*What are some of the many hassles and struggles that come with Christmas in our culture?*

*How do you manage to find joy during the holiday season despite these many struggles?*

## Scripture Reading

### **Matthew 2:1-12 (KJV)**

1 Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem,

2 Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him.

3 When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.

4 And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born.

5 And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written by the prophet,

6 And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel.

7 Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, enquired of them diligently what time the star appeared.

8 And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young child; and when ye have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also.

9 When they had heard of the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was.

10 When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy.

11 And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense and myrrh.

12 And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way.



# Understanding

## **MATTHEW 2:1-2**

The phrase “wise men” in this passage comes from the Greek word magos. That is why some English translations refer to the wise men as magi. It’s the same word used in the Septuagint, the Greek Old Testament, in Daniel 2:2, when the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar gathered men skilled in religious and magical arts to interpret his strange dreams. Although we know little about the wise men in Matthew 2, we can assume based on their profession that they weren’t Jews. But because of their knowledge of the Old Testament prophecies and their interest in the star, they sought out the newborn Messiah.

*What do you think motivated the wise men to journey so far from home to investigate another religion’s Messiah?*

*How are the wise men another example of God revealing His truth to unlikely people?*

The wise men were learned, familiar with the Jewish prophecies and astronomy. We cannot know the exact circumstances from which they went looking for Jesus, but look they did, and look we must. We have to make the conscious choice to pursue Jesus, especially during a time in the year intentionally set aside for this purpose.

## **MATTHEW 2:7-12**

Having been given the location of the birthplace of the King of the Jews, the wise men continued their journey. What the magi recognized as divine guidance filled them with joy (v. 10). Upon seeing Jesus, they did what they

set out to do: they prostrated themselves before Him and worshiped Him (v. 2, 11). The wise men were in awe of Jesus.

*Note the responses of the wise men upon seeing Jesus. How was their reaction to Jesus both similar and different to the response Christians make to Christ?*

*How did God use pagan wisdom to lead them to ultimate wisdom – His Son?*

*How can worshipping Jesus help insulate us from the noise that the Christmas season brings?*

The wise men were the first Gentiles mentioned to worship Jesus. Upon finding the One they had been looking for, they didn't merely gawk or stare. Rather, they gave themselves to Him, in full recognition of the fact that He was no mere child, but God incarnate. Remembering the deity of Jesus and worshipping Him during a season in which our culture likes to marginalize Him goes a long way toward shutting out the noise of the holiday season.

But the wise men did not merely worship. They also gave.

*Look at verse 11. What three gifts do the wise men give Jesus? What is the significance of these gifts?*

The gifts used to honor Jesus were associated with royalty. Because Matthew has not yet introduced the theme of Jesus' death, it is not likely that he is implying it here, even though myrrh was a spice often used in embalming. (Additionally, unbeknownst to her, Mary used myrrh to anoint Jesus for His burial in Matthew 26:7.) Gold, then and now, was a precious metal prized for its beauty and value, an appropriate regal gift. Frankincense and myrrh were fragrant spices and perfumes equally appropriate for such adoration and worship. Similar visits of magi to royalty are described in other Greco-Roman literature of the time, but more significant here is the Jewish background.

*In what sense can we give to Jesus, especially during the Christmas season?*

*In your journey toward Jesus, how are you like the wise men?  
How are you unlike them?*

How we respond to the information we have about Jesus determines what impact our relationship with Him will have on our lives. Just like Herod and the wise men, we're presented with information about the Messiah. How we respond determines how our relationship with Christ will impact our lives. We can pursue an intellectual faith only, one that consists of studying facts about Christ but never letting that knowledge change us. We can let that knowledge make us insecure and cause us to wonder what we'll have to give up to follow Christ. Or, like the wise men, we can risk everything for Christ and choose to worship Him and do so with overflowing joy.

## Application Questions

*For the wise men, God used a star to point them to the Messiah. What kinds of events does God use to point others to His Son today?*

*What things need to change in your life this holiday season in order to seek, worship, and give to Jesus?*

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# 2

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## SESSION 2

# Making Room for Jesus

## INTRODUCTION

The Christmas story never grows old. Indeed, it should be fresh to us every year. Of course, it's not just a holiday for the Christian: a holy day. Many people find themselves to be busy during this time of year but leave out the most important person. Without Christ, though, there is no Christmas. Sadly, it's easy even for the Christian to be so busy that we crowd Christ out of our Christmas celebrations, and the rest of the year too.

*What are some of the most meaningful Christmas traditions for your family?*

*Which songs do you think best reflect the true meaning of Christmas?*

*How would you describe the world into which Jesus came?*

## Scripture Reading

### LUKE 2:1-15 (KJV)

1 And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed.

2 (And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.)

3 And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city.

4 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:)

5 To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child.

6 And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered.

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.

8 And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.

9 And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.

10 And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.

11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.

12 And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.

13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying,

14 Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.

15 And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us.

## UNDERSTANDING

### **LUKE 2:1-7.**

Luke's record of Jesus' birth is both simple and magnificent. Luke's record frames Jesus' birth in historical terms while dramatically demonstrating how God chose to invade human history. God worked through the ordinary plans of government officials to bring Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem for Jesus' birth and then used common people to spread the extraordinary message of His birth.

*As with his other writings, Luke gives the historical setting of the birth of Jesus. What implications does this setting suggest about the world into which Jesus came?*

*What does the local setting of Jesus' birth tell us about the way He entered our world?*

*When did you first sense that Jesus wanted to enter and reign in your world?*

*Verse 7 says there was no room for them at the lodging place. While this is certainly a historical event, how does it also serve*



*as a metaphor for what happens with people's rejection of Jesus today?*

Jesus humbled Himself in ways beyond our understanding. This is how much He loved us: that He stepped out of heaven into a manger for us. And that was just the beginning.

### **LUKE 2:8-15**

In the countryside near Bethlehem, shepherds were working in the fields. Shepherds were considered ceremonially unclean because of the duties their occupation required of them. Also, their work schedule often prevented them from being cleansed at the temple. As a result, these men were considered very low in the social order. Yet, they would be the first to hear of the Savior's birth, and be the first ones to share it.

*Why do you think the first announcement of Jesus' birth was given to lowly shepherds? What does that say about Jesus? What does that say about the nature of diversity inherent within the gospel?*

*What might the shepherds have found most incredible about the angels' message? How do you think they must have felt in hearing it?*

*We like to sing about shepherds and to see them on Christmas cards, but in what tangible ways are the shepherds good examples for us to follow today?*

*How do these verses encourage you to place Jesus first in your life?*

From no room in the inn, to a lowly manger, and then to a place in these shepherds' hearts, we see the importance of making room for Jesus. Once we have received Christ, like the shepherds, we have the responsibility and privilege of helping others know Jesus' name!

## Application Questions

*How did you receive the message that Jesus came to save you when you first heard it? Who did you first tell once you placed your faith in Jesus?*

*What does your enthusiasm to tell others about Jesus and what He's done in your life say about your relationship with Him?*

*How can you honor Jesus with your Christmas celebrations in a way that leads others to make room for Him in their own hearts? Who do you know that needs to hear the true message of Christmas?*

*In what ways can you renew your enthusiasm for the message of Jesus' birth so that it makes a difference throughout the year?*

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# 3

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## SESSION 3

# Returning to Great Expectations

## INTRODUCTION

Sometimes events in life greatly exceed our expectations, and other times they fail to live up to the hype in our mind. Simeon and Anna had lived in anticipation of God's promised Messiah. Recognizing Jesus as the One through whom salvation would be made available to all people, Simeon offered praise to God. Following Simeon's example, we should recognize and receive the salvation God offers in Jesus, and make praise to God for His salvation a prominent element of our lives.

*Think about something you waited a long time to do, such as leave home, get married, have a baby, or get your dream job. What was your greatest expectation for that event?*

*Did the event live up to your expectation?*

## Scripture Reading

### LUKE 2:22-38

22 And when the days of her purification according to the law of Moses were accomplished, they brought him to Jerusalem, to present him to the Lord;

23 (As it is written in the law of the Lord, Every male that openeth the womb shall be called holy to the Lord;)

24 And to offer a sacrifice according to that which is said in the law of the Lord, A pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons.

25 And, behold, there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon; and the same man was just and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel: and the Holy Ghost was upon him.

26 And it was revealed unto him by the Holy Ghost, that he should not see death, before he had seen the Lord's Christ.

27 And he came by the Spirit into the temple: and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him after the custom of the law,

28 Then took he him up in his arms, and blessed God, and said,

29 Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word:

30 For mine eyes have seen thy salvation,

31 Which thou hast prepared before the face of all people;

32 A light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel.

33 And Joseph and his mother marvelled at those things which were spoken of him.

34 And Simeon blessed them, and said unto Mary his mother, Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel; and for a sign which shall be spoken against;

35 (Yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also,) that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.

36 And there was one Anna, a prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Aser: she was of a great age, and had lived with an husband seven years from her virginity;

37 And she was a widow of about fourscore and four years, which departed not from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day.

38 And she coming in that instant gave thanks likewise unto the Lord, and spake of him to all them that looked for redemption in Jerusalem.

## UNDERSTANDING

### LUKE 2:22-26

*How would you describe Simeon, based on these verses?*

*What was Simeon waiting for? What do you think the consolation of Israel means?*

Simeon was “righteous”; that is, he kept God’s laws and the laws of his society, behaving well toward others. He also was “devout,” carefully fulfilling prescribed religious duties. The combination of the words righteous and devout stresses that he thoughtfully lived out his relationship with God. In addition, Simeon was waiting for the consolation of Israel. This referred to the hope Israel had in regard to God’s plan for the nation. More specifically, it referred to the Messiah’s role in that plan. Simeon lived with the anticipation that God’s promised Deliverer could come at any time.

### LUKE 2:27-32

*How did Simeon recognize Jesus?*

*What is the relationship between Simeon's righteousness and devotion and his recognition of the Savior?*

What we learn from Simeon is that an intimate, personal relationship with God enables us to respond to God's leading. Simeon was walking in a right relationship with God. He was anticipating the Messiah's coming, which indicates he took God's promises seriously. In addition, he was "moved by the Holy Spirit" (v. 27). Finally, Simeon was worshiping God in the temple. God used Simeon's worship time to communicate Jesus' identity and mission.

*When we come to church to worship God, do we come with the anticipation that God will reveal Himself to us? Why or why not?*

*What does Simeon predict about the mission of Jesus?*

*What does it mean that Jesus is "a light for revelation to the Gentiles"?*

The word translated Gentiles in verse 32 is from the Greek word *ethnos*, meaning nations. It's the same word Jesus used in the Great Commission, "go and make disciples of all nations" (Matt. 28:19). The coming of Jesus was more than a fulfillment of Israel's messianic hopes. Jesus is the light revealing and providing God's way of salvation for all people. Though Israel has always



had a special place in God's plan, God's plan of redemption includes both Jews and Gentiles. (See Isa. 40:5; 42:6; 49:6; 52:9-10.).

*How might knowing that Jesus' plan of redemption is for all people challenge us to invest in missions this Holiday season?*

*How can you help others recognize the Savior this week?*

### **LUKE 2:33-38**

The coming of Jesus is not just a heart-warming, feel-good story. Jesus was destined to cause the fall and rise of many. This prophecy asserted two opposite reactions to Jesus. Division would result from His life and ministry as some would fall in judgment while others would rise in salvation. Some of Jesus' own people would reject Him. Jesus would cause division and opposition even as He went about bringing reconciliation, redemption, and salvation.

*How is Jesus still the cause of the rising and falling of people today? Why are some people threatened by Jesus?*

*How can anticipating opposition help you deal with it?*

The truth of Christ's coming, while welcomed by some, is threatening to others. We need to remember that the salvation we have received in Christ is completely undeserved. We did nothing to earn it--it is the result of the

unmerited kindness of God being showered freely on us. There may have even been a time in our lives when we openly opposed the gospel. Knowing that we are going to face opposition and that we too once opposed the gospel will help us be prepared to face our opponents with grace and point them to Christ even in the face of their opposition.

*How does Luke describe Anna? How was she anticipating the Messiah?*

*Why do you think Luke included Anna in this account of Jesus' purification at the temple?*

Ancient Israel and Rome were male dominated cultures and yet, Luke included this episode of a female prophet worshipping Jesus. Including this story would not have impressed anyone in Luke's day. This further illustrates the truth of verses 29-32, that Jesus has come to be savior to all people. In addition to race, Anna's inclusion reminds us that Jesus' sacrifice is for all regardless of sex or social status. Anna shines as an example of what it means to delight in Christ.

## Application Questions

*What is your greatest longing? What does that longing reveal about the central focus of your life?*

*How has the discussion today challenged you to keep your focus on Jesus?*

*In what ways are you making praise to God for His salvation in Jesus a prominent part of your lifestyle? What could you do to make it more prominent?*

*Jesus is God's salvation made available for all people. What is our church doing to help spread the news around the world? How can you help?*

# RETHINKING *Christmas*

For many, Christmas can be a difficult time of year: busy, overwhelming, depressing, or disappointing. The joy meant to be felt at Christmas can be easily drowned out by the commercialization of it. This holiday season, rediscover Christmas through a whole new perspective - one that returns us to its humble and awe-inspiring origins.



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