

CHRISTMAS, AS ADVERTISED

Recovering the purpose and power of this holy season.



PART 3: THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD IN CHRISTMAS

The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Christmas, As Advertised, Part 3
The Sovereignty of God in Christmas
A *ReVision* Study from The Fellowship of Ailbe
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Welcome to *ViewPoint*

Welcome to *The Sovereignty of God in Christmas*, an overview of the many ways Christmas reminds us of God's sovereign, wise, powerful, and loving rule of all created things. *The Sovereignty of God in Christmas* is one of our *ViewPoint* series of studies in Biblical worldview.

This study is part 3 of a 3-part series on *Christmas, As Advertised*. In these studies we're reviewing the purpose of Christmas and what we can learn about God – and ourselves – by a better understanding and use of this season.

These studies are designed for individual or group use. While you may derive much benefit from studying on your own, that benefit can be greatly enhanced by joining with a friend or a group to read, discuss, share, challenge, and pray for one another.

Take one lesson at a time, reading the Scriptures and narrative aloud, and pausing to reflect on and discuss the questions provided. Don't be in a hurry. Be willing to take more than one session on a lesson if it will allow you to delve more deeply into the subject matter.

If you're in a group, make sure you prepare for each study by reading through the lesson in advance and answering the questions in writing. Take turns leading your group. Let every member share in the privilege and responsibility of facilitating discussions. Group leaders should not feel like they have to "have all the answers." Their task is simply to lead the group through the readings and questions, and to help everyone participate.

These studies are designed as brief introductions to the subject under consideration. We hope they will enlarge your worldview, help you to become more firmly rooted in Scripture, equip you to minister to others, and stimulate you to want to learn more about the Word of God and the Biblical worldview.

We are happy to receive your suggestions for future topics and studies. Contact us at our webpage. And if you're not receiving *ViewPoint* first thing every day, then be sure to register on the website, www.ailbe.org.

T. M. Moore
Principal

1 The Fullness of the Time

But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. Galatians 4.4, 5

The scope of divine sovereignty

At Christmas we rightly celebrate the coming of the Lord into human history for the salvation of the world. The Babe in the manger of Bethlehem was God-become-flesh, the Word and Son of God incarnate for the redemption of God's people and the restoration of all things. All our Christmas carols and celebrations rightly focus on Jesus and the wonder, mystery, grace, and glory of the Incarnation of Christ.

But in the radiant glow of that magnificent birth it can be easy to lose sight of the larger picture of God's sovereignty. The sovereign power and goodness of God are not limited merely to the work Jesus came to do of saving our souls. God is sovereign not only in our redemption, as the events of Christmas make clear, but also in everything else. All the affairs of men and nations, creation and culture, the cosmos and world outside our front doors – *everything* is subject to and dependent on the sovereign wisdom, grace, goodness, and power of God.

And Christmas provides an opportunity to survey the field of divine sovereignty and thus, hopefully, to appreciate with even greater wonder and conviction the miracle of the Incarnation and its implications for the world.

In what sense "full"?

Paul wrote that Jesus was born in "the fullness of the time." We do well to ponder the meaning of that phrase. In what sense had "time" arrived at its "fullness" in that Bethlehem manger? In answering this question we can gain a better understanding of the sovereignty of God over time and history.

Let's note, first of all, the "fullness" of divine revelation. It had been 400 years since God last spoke to His people through the mouth of a prophet. The words of Malachi end with the promise of Elijah's coming to herald "the great and awesome day of the LORD" (Mal. 4.5). After that, silence. The revelation of God was complete, as far as God determined to bring it to that point. The prophecies of Christ and His Kingdom – scores of them – were in place. Now all that was necessary was to wait.

But why 400 years? We recall that Israel was captive in Egypt for 400 years before God sent His redeemer, Moses, to deliver them from captivity into the freedom of His promises (Gen. 15.13). In the same way, the coming of Jesus at the end of 400 years of silence filled up the timing of God, and signaled the resumption of His work of redemption on behalf of His people. Those like Zechariah, Simeon, and others who were waiting for the redemption of Israel (Lk. 2.25) would not have failed to note the significance of God's timing.

Lord over history

But God was not inactive during this period of silence. Indeed, He was preparing the world in significant ways for the coming of Christ and His Kingdom. The Roman Empire, as it turned out, was the perfect political institution for God's purposes. As the Lord used John the Baptist to prepare the way for the coming of Christ, so He used the Roman Empire to prepare the world for the arrival and rapid expansion of the Kingdom of our Lord.

Consider: Roman roads were a protected transportation network from Egypt to France, allowing ease of movement the world had never known before – perfect for itinerating evangelists to travel quickly and safely from place to place. In addition, since the days of Alexander the Great, one could travel from Persia to Britain and, if he spoke Greek, he could be understood and his written words quickly copied and shared. The

Jewish diaspora, accomplished some 60 years before the birth of Christ, established Jewish communities throughout the Empire, and with them, the idea of one God Who speaks through prophets and encodes His Word in books. The centurions we meet in Luke 7 and Acts 10 were representative of many who had become “friends of God” by their association with Jewish synagogues throughout the Empire.

Add to all this the Roman Peace, which sustained a settled political environment, Roman law and order throughout the Empire, relative freedom of religion everywhere within Rome’s jurisdiction, and the fact that the vast majority of the population of the Roman world were either poor or slaves – thus, a people eager for some hope of a better life – and you have just the right conditions for the coming of Christ and His Kingdom. You have, indeed, the “fullness of time.”

The God Who became a Man in human history is also the Lord Who rules all of history according to His good, wise, and sovereign purposes. As Jesus slept in heavenly peace in that manger in Bethlehem, safe in the sovereign care of His Father, so we may rest in the sovereignty of God, Who works all things in His way and time, according to the counsel of His will, and for the good of those Christ came to save (Eph. 1.11; Rom. 8.28).

NEXT STEPS

For reflection or discussion

1. Does it seem to you that most of the Christians you know really believe that God is sovereign in *all* the events of history? Why or why not?
2. What do we learn about the sovereign wisdom, reach, and intent of God’s power from the examples T. M. provides in this study?
3. If we really believed God to be sovereign like this, how should that affect our outlook about world events? Every struggles and trials? Our own highest purpose in life?
4. What are your goals for this study? What do you hope to learn?
5. How can you help your fellow students to gain a better understanding of the reason for the Incarnation?

Next steps: What would you point to in our world as evidence of the sovereignty of God? Talk with some Christian friends about this question.

For prayer:

2 The Lord of Lineages

The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. Matthew 1.1

The genealogy rage

You will be pleased to know, as I was, that Susie and I are descendants of some very important people. Our son-in-law, Andy Bobb, who knows about such matters, has traced our genealogies back several centuries. Susie is remotely related to the 10th-century first High King of Ireland, Brian Boru, and I'm somehow descended from the great 17th century English poet, John Milton.

So, show some respect, will you?

Genealogies are the rage these days. Ads on TV, programs on PBS, books and websites galore invite curious roots-seekers to discover something about themselves in their ancestors. It's possible to read more into these genealogies than what is justified, but it's also truly possible to learn something about ourselves that might unlock some mystery or point some new direction for our lives.

Genealogy and Israel

Genealogies were important to the people of ancient Israel. As we read in the opening chapters of 1 Chronicles, genealogies helped people to understand who they were, where they belonged, and what place they might expect to occupy in society.

But genealogies were also a reminder of the sovereignty and goodness of God, Who kept His people alive from generation to generation, so that they might hope for and share in the promises made to their fathers. The recitation of one's lineage provided an opportunity for reviewing family history and retelling old and much-loved stories, but also of thanking and praising the Lord for His faithfulness throughout the ages in creating and sustaining a people for Himself.

So we're not surprised when we see, in the gospels of Matthew and Luke, listings of the two genealogies from which our Lord Jesus descended in the flesh.

Scholars differ on how to interpret these records, since they go in different directions on the last leg toward Joseph. Some have suggested that Luke records Mary's ancestors while Matthew records Joseph's; others want to harmonize both genealogies in a way that points to Joseph as the *de jure* if not *de facto* father of Jesus.

For our purposes, we want to note some clues in these two accounts – in Matthew 1 and Luke 3 – that witness to the sovereignty of God.

The witness of the genealogy

We note, first of all, that the combined genealogies tie Jesus emphatically to three of the most important figures in Jewish and human history: Adam, the father of us all, and the federal head of all humankind; Abraham, the recipient of God's promise to bless the nations; and David, through whom God determined to establish an eternal Kingdom. If we think of the genealogies like a trajectory of human history through time, we see divine providence in guiding the human race, the promise of blessing, and the promise of an eternal Kingdom straight into that manger in Bethlehem.

Second, we note that these genealogies include the names of people other than descendants of Israel. Matthew mentions Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth; all were Gentile women. Luke extends the genealogy of Christ beyond Abraham to the time before the historic line of Jewish descent, into the primeval period of human

history. It is as if God intended the genealogy of Christ to bear witness to the purpose of His coming, that He might incorporate into Himself all nations and tribes as one redeemed people, sanctified unto the Lord.

Tracing the genealogy back to Adam is important, as Paul understood (Rom. 5), for Jesus is the “second Adam” Who came to undo the mess into which the first Adam’s disobedience had plunged us, by resisting every temptation, fulfilling all righteousness, and crushing the head of the serpent, that we might be set free for eternal life.

Finally, each of the genealogies intends to tie Jesus to the promises of God made to Abraham and to the eternal Kingdom extended through David and His descendants. The promises and Kingdom of God come together in Jesus Christ, just as the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament declare.

Thus everything we are as human beings and everything we might hope for from God are hinted at in the genealogies of Jesus provided by Matthew and Luke.

We might be tempted to pass over these genealogies as we recount the blessed and glorious story of Jesus’ birth, but, if we do, we will miss something significant about the sovereignty of God in creating and sustaining the human race, and upholding and fulfilling His promises and blessings through one holy Infant.

For reflection or discussion

1. How should we understand the contemporary “lineages” or “genealogies” craze? What are people hoping to discover?
2. How many different ways can you see the lineages and genealogies mattered to people in the Bible? Should your “spiritual lineage” matter to you? Why or why not?
3. What differences can you see between Jesus’ genealogy in Matthew and the one provided in Luke? Why are these differences important?
4. In what ways do the genealogies of Jesus place Him squarely in the middle of God’s great redemptive plan for the world?
5. Suggest some ways we might make better use of the genealogies of Jesus during the Christmas season:

Next steps: Here’s a Christmas celebration you can try with your family or friends: Read through the genealogies in Matthew 1 and Luke 3. Let each person tell a story of one of the names in either genealogy, and then share how that person’s story points us forward to the coming of Christ. For example: Ruth. She married a “kinsman redeemer” and thus became a Gentile grafted into the people of God – a foreshadowing of what Jesus would do in bringing peace and salvation to all nations (Eph. 2.11-22).

For prayer:

3 The King of Conception

Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: After His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Spirit. Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not wanting to make her a public example, was minded to put her away secretly. But while he thought about these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins." So all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying: "Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel," which is translated, "God with us." Matthew 1.18-23

Bogus sovereigns

In our time certain scientists, moralists, pundits, and politicians want us to believe that human beings are sovereign over the creation of life. A pregnant woman, for example, has sovereign authority to determine whether or not that creature in her womb should be allowed to live. Barren parents should be able to shop the local sperm bank to find a suitable donor for the child they have been unable to conceive. Cloning, test tubes, and petri dishes ought not be ruled out as means for creating new life. And "designer children" might one day be as normal as designer software for your computer.

Life, we are told, is ours for the making.

But the message of Christmas reminds us that all such hubris by the bogus sovereigns of our secular age comes under the judgment of the one true Life-Giver, the King of Conception and Lord of Life.

Zechariah and Elizabeth

God is the Giver of life. He is sovereign over the womb. He withholds the gift of life as He pleases, but He is able to grant it even when it seems least likely to occur. This, at least, is the witness of Zechariah and Elizabeth, the parents of John the Baptist.

The story is familiar (Luke 1) so I will only rehearse an outline here. God promises to visit the elderly couple and give them a child, even though years of trying to conceive have not produced a single offspring. Zechariah, upon hearing the news, wants proof. He cannot accept the Word of God for the glorious promise and blessing it is. He wants the angel's message to be authenticated by some method or means agreeable to his ability to sort it all out.

For his doubt he is struck dumb for a season, until the "proof" he seeks comes to fruition, according to the Word of God, from the God-blessed womb of Zechariah's faithful wife.

This situation recalls the ancient stories of Abraham and Isaac, and their struggles to trust the Lord to fulfill His promises, in spite of the barrenness of Sarah and Rebekah. The birth of John to Zechariah and Elizabeth would certainly have brought these two stories from Israel's ancient past to mind, to rekindle hope that God was once again beginning to work among His people to bring life to a nation trapped in the barren womb of Roman oppression. It's no wonder all the people who heard about this situation wondered at what God might be planning to do with this miraculous child (Lk. 1.66).

Mary

Similarly, God showed His sovereignty over conception and life by granting a Child in the womb to Mary, without the benefit of human conception. It's interesting to compare Mary's response to the angel's announcement to that of Zechariah. Whereas he wanted proof, and did not believe, Mary believed, but only wondered how in the world such a thing could be.

We still cannot explain the conception of Jesus in the womb of this faithful virgin. We only know that God's Holy Spirit brought divine life into the womb of this daughter of Abraham and David, thus beginning the miracle of the Incarnation and advancing the work of redemption toward its climax. If we insist on understanding this event according to the tenets of science and reason, then we presume to know as God knows about all such matters, and we're no better off than the bogus sovereigns of our secular age – or than faithless Zechariah.

Christmas reminds us that God is the King of Conception and the Lord of Life. The terms of life and the ways unto it are in His hands, and while modern technologies may be of value in furthering the Lord's purposes for life, they must not be used in ways that overstep the bounds of human dignity and uniqueness through methods, protocols, or "privileges" that cheapen life or throw it away as a matter of mere convenience or personal preference.

For reflection or discussion

1. Why was it so important that Immanuel – "God with Us" – should be born of a woman? Why did that woman have to be a virgin?
2. God is the Giver of all life in that He is sovereign over all things, including the process of conception? Compare the different observations we can make concerning the sovereignty of God between the conception of John the Baptist and the conception of Jesus.
3. Is it really all that important that Jesus should have been born of a virgin? Why do unbelievers have such a hard time with this? How can we help them at least to understand the reason for this?
4. How should God's sovereignty over the giving of life lead us to think about life issues before us in our day?
5. Is your view of the sovereignty of God changing at all as a result of these studies? In what ways? How is your growing understanding of the sovereignty of God affecting your walk with and work for the Lord?

Next steps: How many ways can the conception or birth of a child lead us to praise God for His sovereign grace and goodness? Talk with your children about this question.

For prayer:

4 The King's Heart

*The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD,
Like the rivers of water;
He turns it wherever he wishes.* Proverbs 21.1

Everything is politics?

Listening to the news and paying attention to the events of the day, it's easy to believe that politics is the most important field of human interest and endeavor. After all, just about everything is politics these days – from how we raise our children to who cares for our health to what we can manufacture to who defines the borders and destinies of nations.

Politics is about power, the ability to compel the actions of others. National politics is about power wielded over an entire people, and international politics involves the most powerful people in the world in a perpetual chess match of worldwide proportions and with potentially deadly ramifications.

Given the importance of politics, and the power of those who occupy political roles in society, thoughtful Americans try to choose their leaders wisely, in order to rest the political fortunes of the nation in the most qualified and competent hands.

But when our lives begin to be ruled by politics, so that we are alternately fearful or relieved, or consider ourselves blessed or bummed by politicians and their policies, we have lost sight of an important truth of which the message of Christmas can remind us: The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord. We see this especially in two ways.

The Roman census

The Old Testament prophesied that the Christ should be born in the little town of Bethlehem (Mic. 5.2). Bethlehem was the birthplace of King David, and it was fitting that He Who was to be Heir to David's throne should have His birth in David's hometown.

The genealogies of Jesus point to Mary and Joseph as the ones to whom the Christ was to be born. But there's a problem. Mary and Joseph live in the north, in the town of Nazareth in Galilee of the Gentiles. Bethlehem is in the south. How can this ancient prophecy be fulfilled?

Simple: The sovereign God moved the heart of the Roman Emperor to declare a census, probably for the sake of updating and improving his tax rolls, and part of the stipulation was that each person should enroll in his place of birth (Lk. 2.1-3). All over the Roman world people who lived elsewhere than their place of birth dutifully made a trip to their hometown and checked off or added their names to the lists, which were managed by people like Matthew, who wrote the first gospel.

And so we find Joseph and Mary, his espoused and pregnant wife, making the journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, not merely to enroll for the tax, but to introduce a new King to the world. God had said the Christ would be born in Bethlehem, and Caesar dutifully – albeit unthinkingly – made it happen.

The slaughter of the innocents

The second event is that which is recorded in Matthew 2, the tragic murder and wholesale slaughter of innocent male children in and around the environs of Bethlehem. This event actually must have taken place somewhat later than the first Christmas, since Herod was careful to destroy children two years old and younger. It's possible that Joseph and Mary lingered in Bethlehem, living with relatives, while she regained her

strength and as the Child was being weaned.

At any rate, and for reasons known only to God, it pleased the Lord to highlight the glory of Christmas against the backdrop of humanity's wretchedness. In a section of his prophesy in which Jeremiah is dealing with the promised restoration of the Lord, he includes the verses quoted by Matthew (Matt. 2.18) to account for the slaughter of the children of Bethlehem. These words, in their context in Jeremiah, are immediately followed by words of comfort, including the promise that the people would see their children again (Jer. 31.17) because of the work to be done by One Who was returning to them from the land of their enemies, presumably, Egypt. The passage includes these words (Jer. 31.20):

*Is Ephraim My dear son?
Is he a pleasant child?
For though I spoke against him,
I earnestly remember him still;
Therefore My heart yearns for him;
I will surely have mercy on him, says the LORD.*

Further, the rescue of Jesus into Egypt would have recalled the rescue of Moses from the slaughtering hand of Pharaoh, once again signaling a great work of redemption was about to begin.

Those grieving parents in Bethlehem would have taken comfort to know that God grieved with them, but that His greater plan for His people was as surely unfolding according to His sovereign purposes, as this tragic slaughter had likewise come to pass. The mothers and fathers of Bethlehem would not have questioned the goodness of God. They would have clung to His promises and rested in His sovereignty, the awesome and fearful power of which they had experienced under the hand of a wicked king who was but an instrument of the mysterious but righteous sovereignty of God. Herod acted out of political self-interest, but his actions only fulfilled the eternal and inscrutable wisdom and will of God.

For reflection or discussion

1. Everything may, indeed, be politics, but is politics everything? Explain.
2. The examples cited in this lesson deal with the theological theme of *concursum*. This refers to events – such as the life of Joseph in the Old Testament – in which the will of God is worked out, frequently without their knowing, in the decisions and actions of people. Do you think God continues to work through *concursum* in our day? Can you suggest an example?
3. In His sovereignty God works both directly or immediately – without any intervening causes – and indirectly and by various means. In what ways does the Christmas story demonstrate both of these?
4. Are kings and rulers still subject to God's sovereignty today? Why or why not?
5. What are the implications for us if we believe that our rulers are subject to the sovereignty and judgment of God?

Next steps: What are some ways that politics affects people's sense of wellbeing? How can we remind ourselves, in the face of any political situation, that the king's heart is in the hand of the Lord? Talk with some Christian friends about these questions.

For prayer:

5 Lord of Names

And when eight days were completed for the circumcision of the Child, His name was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before He was conceived in the womb. Luke 2.21

What's in a name?

Recently in our family we went through the joy and anticipation of playing the “name game”, as our daughter Ashley and her husband David awaited the birth of our newest grandchild. Whenever we were together, we would bandy about various names, trying to settle on just the right one for the next Durant child.

“Ralph” was the ultimate winner, and he surely is.

Names matter, as Paul Tournier explained in his book, *The Naming of Persons*. And names especially matter in Scripture, at least, certain names. We often find names being changed to express the will and purpose of God. So Abram, the father of nations, became Abraham, the father of many nations. Jacob, the deceiver, became Israel, the prince of God who prevailed to receive His blessing. And so also Hoshea, the son of Nun, was renamed by Moses, Joshua, to indicate that the deliverance of the Lord would come about under his hand (Num. 13.16).

Especially when God Himself gets involved in the name game we should pay careful attention to what He intends. And nowhere is this truer than in the names assigned to the Baby born to Mary and Joseph in that lonely Bethlehem manger at the first Christmas. In the names of Jesus, God sovereignly declares His will and purpose in sending His Son and Word to the world.

Jesus

His given name was to be “Jesus.” Jesus is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew, Joshua. Joshua was known and revered by every Jewish believer as the one who delivered the people of God into the promised land of God’s covenant, defeating all Israel’s enemies and establishing the people in the blessings of the Lord. Jesus was the right name for Mary’s Baby since, as the angel explained to Joseph, He would save His people from their sins (Matt. 1.21). Jesus would deliver all who believe in Him from their captivity to sin and the devil into the freedom and blessings of the sons and daughters of God.

Wherever Jesus went, as He preached about the Kingdom of God and the promised salvation of the Lord, people would have associated Him with Joshua, and been encouraged to hope that *this* Joshua might lead *them* to victory over their enemies and peace in the blessings of God.

Christ

“Christ” is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word, “Messiah”, which means “anointed.” When Jesus was challenged, during His trial by the high priest, concerning whether or not He was the Christ, no one doubted what the judge was trying to determine: Did this Jesus regard Himself as the One anointed by God, specially chosen, prepared, sent, commissioned, and empowered, for the task of bringing the Kingdom and salvation of God to the people of Israel? Jesus affirmed that it was so, and it was this affirmation that brought the condemnation of death upon Him. Going around claiming to be God’s Anointed One was no light matter in ancient Israel. People who said such things were condemned to die.

But this, as we know, was completely in line with what God intended for His Messiah.

Immanuel

Matthew tells us (1.22, 23) that the birth of Jesus took place as it did to fulfill an ancient prophecy from Isaiah

(7.14): “So all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying: ‘Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel.’” “Immanuel” is a Hebrew word which means, as Matthew explains, “God with us.” “Immanuel” is not so much a *name* Jesus bore as an *explanation* for Who He was. Born of a virgin, anointed to bring the salvation and promises of God to His people, Jesus was tasked with a mission only God Himself could perform. And, as John tells us in the prologue to his gospel, this is precisely what God did, sending His Son to “tabernacle” among us – God with us – in order to do for us what we desperately require.

Thus we see the sovereignty of God at work in the names associated with the Baby born in that manger in Bethlehem. Jesus Christ, Immanuel: What Child is this? He’s the One anointed by God, the very Word and Son of God incarnate, sent to bring the people of God into the promised land of saving grace and glory. He vanquishes all our enemies – especially those who hold our souls captive. He overcomes every obstacle to our entering the holy place of the Lord. He is with us to fulfill all righteousness and bear all punishment, so that we might be with Him where He is, forever in glory.

What’s in a name? When it comes to Jesus Christ, the name we will sing over and over during this Christmas season, what’s in a name is everything, all our fondest hopes and most cherished longings.

For reflection or discussion

1. Do you agree that names matter? At least, to the people whose names we either know and use, or fail to learn and thus ignore? Give some additional examples of the way names matter in the Bible.
2. Why is “Jesus” just the right name for the Savior of the world?
3. Why is “Messiah” or “Christ” just the right title for Jesus?
4. How should we be encouraged by “Immanuel” as an explanation for Jesus Christ?
5. Besides these three “names”, what is your favorite name for our Lord Jesus? Why?

Next steps: Read through some Christmas carols with some friends. How many different names for Jesus do you encounter? How many ways do the carols represent the work of Jesus as Christ and Immanuel? Then sing the carols together with new appreciation for their profound meaning.

For prayer:

6 Reconciler of Worlds

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men." Luke 2.13, 14

On seeing the unseen

The writer of Hebrews explains that true, saving faith is rooted in things hoped for, but unseen. He writes, "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (Heb. 11.1, my translation). We are so familiar with this idea that it's easy to miss the great significance of what our sovereign God has accomplished through Jesus Christ in reconciling the whole of creation and restoring all who believe to our proper places in the grand scheme of things.

For as the first Christmas makes clear, the coming of the Baby born in Bethlehem signaled the beginning of the restoration of all things, including the reconciling of the material and spiritual worlds. Jesus came down from the heavens in order to make a way for heaven and earth to be united as one, in our souls, in the presence of God, and in a new world coming, and to come.

Christians perhaps take this for granted. And in doing so we miss a good deal of the significance of Jesus' birth, and neglect to make good use of the benefits afforded us as citizens of the heavenly Kingdom. Let me explain a little more.

Religious, but not spiritual

People in Jesus' day were confused about religion. They had their traditions, of course, and most of them believed in God. The "secular Jew" so common in our own day would have been almost unknown in the first century in Palestine.

At the same time, it had become difficult for most people to engage meaningfully with the spiritual realities back of their faith. The Pharisees, one of three religious parties in Israel, had reduced religion to traditions, formulas, and rigid norms of behavior. They invoked the name of God primarily to justify and preserve their roles as the keepers of Israel's religion during a time of political constraint.

The Sadducees, the second religious party in Israel, believed in God but didn't believe in a spiritual world. They were the religious liberals of their day, for whom the name of God was a convenient way of identifying with the people while, at the same time, occupying a kind of intellectual plateau, as they saw it, somewhere above the masses.

The Herodians were the third party of Jewish leaders, the smallest of the three, and were distinguished by their close allegiance with the Roman puppet king. They were the pragmatic political wing of Jewish religion and, as such, had little say in the day-to-day religious affairs of the people.

Most people in that day believed in a spiritual realm, but the only experience any of them had with that realm was demonic, rather than angelic, in nature. God had not spoken, whether through prophet or angel, for 400 years, and so, for most people, while they believed in God, any sense of a spiritual life would have been completely foreign to their experience.

Heaven come down

When the angel appeared to those shepherds, therefore, that must have been a truly amazing thing – so amazing, we can imagine, that most folks they told simply would have refused to believe (they were, after all, only *shepherds*).

But the angel's appearing, followed by the multitude of the heavenly host, announced that the event they reported signified a new day, a day in which the "veil" separating heaven and earth was being drawn aside, and those who looked to Jesus could now begin to share in the life of glory and spiritual power which the hosts of heaven knew, and which their appearing on that Judean plain foreshadowed and foretold.

Jesus came from heaven to earth, but He also brought heaven to earth when He came. His message was that the Kingdom of God was near, had come, and was within us. Now we would begin to know the Lord, to be indwelt by His Spirit, to experience and express His glory, and to seek and advance His Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. Jesus came to make the blessings of God flow far as the curse of sin is found, and to begin the work of reconciling the seen world of time and materiality with the unseen world of departed saints, angels, and God on His glorious throne.

In the birth of Jesus, God began the work of reconciling the whole of creation to Himself, and us right along with it. It is thus no wonder that, at Christmas, the saints of God, seeing through to that unseen realm of glory, give evidence of their faith by singing, "Joy to the world! The Lord is come!"

For reflection or discussion

1. Meditate on Hebrews 11.1 Explain each aspect of the twofold definition of "faith" given here. How is this faith evident in your life?
2. When Jesus was born, a veil separated the holiest place of the Jewish temple from all other places. When He died, that veil was torn *from the top to the bottom*. Explain the message of this event.
3. We are not saved *by* works, but we're not saved *without* them. Explain.
4. Salvation is all of grace, as the Christmas story makes abundantly and eloquently clear. Meditate on Philippians 2.5-11, then explain the first part of this question in your own words:
5. What does "reconcile" mean? Why does the world and everything and everyone in it need to be reconciled to God? How could it be that Jesus could accomplish so magnificent a feat?

Next steps: Read and meditate on Isaac Watts' hymn, "Joy to the World!" How many different ways does this hymn celebrate the work of God in reconciling the worlds unto Himself? Talk with some Christian friends about this, then sing the hymn together.

For prayer:

7 Destroyer of Kingdoms

Then Simeon blessed them, and said to Mary His mother, "Behold, this Child is destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign which will be spoken against (yes, a sword will pierce through your own soul also), that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed." Luke 2.34, 35

Man of Sorrows

In his great Christmas oratorio, Johann Sebastian Bach includes a lengthy scene of celebration surrounding the birth of Jesus. All the instruments and chorus join in jubilation to acknowledge the birth of God's Messiah and announce the Good News of the Kingdom to the world.

And then, suddenly, in the midst of all that revelry, Bach inserts the briefest quote from the hymn, "O Sacred Head, now wounded", based on a poem by 12th century theologian, Bernard of Clairvaux. Jesus is the Christ of God, Immanuel, the Bringer of joy and rejoicing to all who know and believe in Him. But He is also the Man of Sorrows, the Lamb of God Who took upon Himself the sins of the world. It is inevitable that the life and radiance of Christmas should also include, in the sovereignty of God, the message of darkness and death.

Simeon's cryptic prophecy to Mary must have sent a shudder down her spine. How could such a beautiful Baby Boy, Whose birth was filled with so much wonder and glory and mystery, ever be the cause of the falling of many in Israel, a sign opposing anything, and a sword to pierce His own mother's soul?

Let's look more closely at Simeon's words.

The end of works religion

Jesus came to bring an end to all religion based on works. The Jews of His day were but the latest generation of those who had sought to earn their way into the favor of God by their "good works." The Pharisees and other religious leaders of Israel were the keepers and arbiters of what amounted to "good" works, and they knew just how to work the formula to keep the people in line behind their leadership. They were the top of the heap in true religion, as they saw it, and everybody else was expected to give them proper deference.

Jesus stripped the mask off that façade and showed that true religion is based on grace and love, not on works and privilege. Those who had been "on the rise" in Israel – and in religions all over the world – would soon enough find themselves falling from their privileged place as the message of grace and salvation began to be Good News all over the world.

The end of kingdoms

Jesus also came to overturn, supplant, and replace the kingdoms of this world – both those of men and that of the devil. Ancient prophecies had foretold the coming of a King and Kingdom that would grow, expand, and replace all the kingdoms of men and demons in order to fill the earth with the knowledge of God and His righteousness (cf. Dan. 2.44, 45; Is. 9.6, 7). This would not occur without a struggle, of course, but, in the end, the Kingdom of Jesus would oppose every way of men and demons to bring a new order of the ages into being, characterized by righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit (Dan. 7.13-27; Rom. 14.17, 18).

Thus, as Herod quickly recognized, and Caesar would shortly understand, the coming of King Jesus was not good news for those authorities and powers who regarded themselves as the last word on the affairs of men and nations.

A sword to the soul

Jesus came at Christmas for the salvation of all who believe in Him. But that salvation comes at a price, a

price of pain and suffering to Jesus, and pain to all who would embrace Him.

The Good News of forgiveness and eternal life, and of the Kingdom and righteousness of God, pierces to the souls of those who believe, bringing conviction, sorrow, repentance, and faith. We can believe that Mary was heartbroken and filled with grief to see her Son harassed, scorned, mocked, beaten, and hanged on a cross.

But even more, her soul, like ours, would have been pierced with sorrow when it became clear that *we* are the ones who subjected Him to all this and put Him on that Roman gibbet. *We* caused His sorrow. *We* brought on His suffering. And we must fall from whatever heights we think we occupy, and yield to His opposition to our presumed autonomy, if we would rise with all those of God's true Israel into the grace and salvation of Joshua our King.

For in Jesus Christ the kingdoms of this world – and of every spiritual domain – have become the Kingdom of our God, and of His Christ, and He, the Man of Sorrows, must reign forever and ever (Rev. 11.15).

For reflection or discussion

1. What is the Kingdom of God? How should we experience this Kingdom? What difference should it make in our lives? What does it mean to “seek” this Kingdom first and always (Matt. 6.33)?
2. Why is Christmas “Good News” about the spiritual realm of wickedness and evil? How does the Kingdom of God overcome that realm in your life?
3. What are the implications of Jesus being King of kings and Lord of lords for all human kingdoms and nations? What is our role, as citizens in Christ's Kingdom, in working toward the realization of those implications?
4. How has this study helped you to appreciate more fully the sovereignty of God?
5. What's the most important lesson you've learned from this study?

Next steps: What do you think? Is there a connection between the Lord's Day and how we use it and the holy seasons of the national calendar? Do you agree that Christians should begin trying to recover the real significance and use of both? Why or why not? Share your thoughts with a Christian friend.

For prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Fellowship of Ailbe is a spiritual fellowship in the Celtic Christian tradition. Our goal is to promote revival, renewal, and awakening, following the teaching of Scripture and the example and heritage of our forebears in the faith.

The Fellowship of Ailbe offers many opportunities for training, prayer, personal growth, and ministry. Visit our website at www.ailbe.org to learn more.

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Thank you.