

Good Morning, to my family and friends. It is the Monday before Christmas, and I want to send this, my "Christmas Greeting" to all of you. I am grateful for technology that allows us to do this. I trust this Christmas season will be a great blessing to you. Keep safe. Keep trusting. Keep serving Jesus. Keep pressing forward as we anticipate His return.

THE BEAUTY OF CHRISTMAS

A Devotional prepared by Dr. Robert L. Morris

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"For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord." (Luke 2:11, NKJV) This is my Christmas message – my Christmas Card - to all who read my Devotionals. Merry Christmas and a Blessed New Year to all. This is also our Christmas Week Devotional. Anyone reading this Devotional has my permission to use it as you desire. Please read Luke 2:1-20 and Matthew 1:18-25 prior to reading the rest of this Devotional. From those two passages of Scripture, you will observe the foundation for the content of this Devotional. It is the magnificent story that never grows old. It needs to be repeated year after year after year. The title, The Beauty of Christmas, is used as the title of numerous Church Christmas musicals, dramas, programs, and probably many sermons. I want to blend the Luke and Matthew accounts of the events surrounding the birth of Jesus, the Messiah. The two Biblical accounts noted above form the true basis for our Christmas celebrations. Such celebrations are incomplete apart from both accounts being included. These two passages when combined provide for us the keys to the Beauty of Christmas.

1. The Simplicity of Christmas. (Luke 2:7) "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." Here is something so exquisitely tender and homelike that year after year through the centuries, much of the world returns to it. The harshness of the world grows a little softer under its matchless simplicity. The calendars of the world's nations return our attention to that magnificent moment in history. Many of the symbols of Christendom draw the attention of all who observe them to that historic day when in a shed for housing animals a Baby was born and laid in a crude feeding trough. Out of the simplicity of that feeding trough there came One for whom untold millions have given their lives, armies have marched, music has been composed, books have been written, poetry has been inspired, and above all else, lives have been transformed. If God had revealed Himself only in the strange phenomenon of a bright star, men may well have doubted their eyes. If He had uttered Himself in some powerful voice of thunder, men might have doubted their ears. If He had taken the form of an angel, men might have been dazzled by an unbelievable brilliance. If He had come as a powerful warrior, brandishing a sword and shield, men would have cringed in fear and submitted in terror! But a tiny Baby Boy, with a cry in the night as He lay in a crude feeding trough in a carved-out animal shed, or in a mother's embracing arms, and later in a plain house for shelter! Here is the legible handwriting of God on the parchment of human history. This has been and shall forever be the Simplicity of Christmas that draws us to the birth of our Savior.

2. The Singing of Christmas. (Luke 2:13, 14a) "And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: 'Glory to God in the highest.'" Could it be that they were "singing" their message? After all God gave the gift of music ... and He loves music. What would Christmas be without the music of Christmas? The hymnals in most of the Churches throughout the world have significant sections that contain the great Christmas carols. We love the Advent hymns and carols and oratorios that have been accumulated through the centuries. They are the skilled and graceful servants of all praiseful hearts. Year by year we turn to them for help in bringing worship to the King of kings. Have you ever thought about this: that if, by some cruel stroke of misfortune, we should suddenly lose our Christmas carols ... Silent Night, Holy Night, O Little Town of Bethlehem, Hark! The Herald Angels Sing, Joy to the World, I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day, O Come, O Come, Emmanuel ... how would we feel? How sorrowful would be our Christmas time! But wait! We would still have an incomparably glorious

collection of great Christmas hymns in the Bible itself. The Holy Spirit has taken care that the birth of Jesus should be surrounded by those exultant outbursts of worship, adoration, and praise that we have come to recognize, and even to name, as the Songs of Christmas. There is the "Ave Maria" of the angel Gabriel (Luke 1:26-35). There is the "Benedictus" first of Elizabeth (Luke 1:42-45), and then the longer one from the heart of Zacharias (Luke 1:68-79). There is also the "Magnificat" of Mary as she responded to the words of her cousin Elizabeth (Luke 1:46-55). There is the "Gloria in Excelsis" of the angels over the hills near Bethlehem (Luke 2:14). And there is the "Nunc Dimittis" of the aged Simeon (Luke 2:29-32). No wonder that prince of preachers, James S. Stewart, with the eloquence for which he was well known, declared that in his judgment "songs and hymns and music can carry us nearer to the burning heart of the Advent message than all the sermons and discourses in the world." Yes, Christmas is caught up in the Singing of Christmas: "Glory to God in the Highest!"

3. The Serenity of Christmas. (Luke 2:14b) "...and on earth peace, goodwill toward men." Not everything about the Biblical story of the birth of Jesus produces the impression of peace, of serenity. There was little order or composure in the overcrowded inn. This required the concerned Joseph to seek shelter in a nearby shed used to house animals, for he sensed that for his beloved Mary, the time of her delivery was close at hand. The Shepherds, on first hearing the strange news from the angel Gabriel, were somewhat ill at ease, for the Scriptures note that "they were terribly frightened" (Luke 2:9). Further, there was no calm in the heart of the arrogant and worried Herod when he heard of the birth of a King, disclosed to him by visiting dignitaries from the east. But when we observe Joseph and Mary, we find an arresting contrast. Considering their plight and peril, we find them amazingly calm. And the Baby, lying in a crude feeding trough with stable noises ceaselessly sounding, was truly the Prince of Peace. In the years to come peace would reside in the throne of His heart. Peace would radiate from His presence like a healing aura. Peace would fall from His lips as from a quiet, refreshing and exhaustless stream. Peace - for the troubled and baffled seekers after truth. Peace - for the wandering ones tossed pitilessly by the raging winds. Peace - for guilty souls reaching out hopefully for the forgiveness of sins. Peace - for frightened people wondering about where to find solutions for tomorrow's troubles. Peace - for the sorrowing looking longingly into the tomorrows asking what lies beyond the grim reality of death. Hear it! The Prince of Peace has come! And with Him a peace quite unknown by this world's self-centered people.

Yes! I know that the cynical minds of the world are prone to scorn the beauty of "peace on earth, good will toward men." After 2,000 years of hearing about this "peace on earth," the world has been continually turning itself into one vast shambles of war, hatred, selfish greed, resulting in hideous crimes that cannot be tolerated in any civilized society. Yes! I know the words of the critics who say that "Christianity has been here for twenty centuries and just look at how much hate and horror are still everywhere." And no one grieves over such a state of things more than do the followers of Jesus the Christ. It is this inner heart grief that compels us in evangelism, missions and Christian social action throughout the world, as we long for Him to step out on the clouds of glory and call His beloved, blood-bought, blood-washed, redeemed Bride, the Church, to be with Him.

There IS peace in this world. No implements of war can alter that fact. The Apostle Paul wrote it clearly: "Therefore having been justified by faith, we have peace with God, through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 5:1). Hear that! "We have peace!" Or again, we hear the same Apostle Paul writing in this same letter to the Romans: "Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit" (Romans 15:13). Then too, we discover the Apostle Paul writing to his beloved friends at Philippi: "The peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, shall guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:7). But supremely and above all else we hear our Lord Jesus Himself saying comfortingly to us: "Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you; not as the world gives, do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful" (John 14:27). Here then, is the quiet reassurance of the Serenity of Christmas that takes its residence in the lives of the people who come in faith to the crude feeding trough in a simple animal shed in Bethlehem.

4. The Splendor of Christmas. (Matthew 1:18-24; Luke 2:11; Luke 2:16-17; Matthew 2:11) Herein is brought together the challenge that the Word of God sets before us. It is found in the approach of four persons or groups of persons who came to the place where they discovered the Baby born on that history-dividing night in Bethlehem ... to a crude feeding trough in a simple animal shed.

A. Joseph who Accepted Jesus. (Matthew 1:18-24) The young Jewish girl was engaged to be married to Joseph. But there was a problem: She was expecting a child. Joseph knew the child was not fathered by himself, but being a righteous, respectful, and obviously a caring man, decided to end the relationship secretly. He did not know that her child was conceived by the Holy Spirit. But God carefully revealed this truth to him, and in obedience to the message from God, "married her but did not know her intimately until she gave birth to a son. And he named Him Jesus" (Matthew 1:24-25, HCSB). Joseph! Something of the Beauty of Christmas would be lost if we could not see the Godly spirit of Joseph as he gave the gift of his heart and life ... the gift of acceptance.

B. The Angels who Acclaimed Jesus. (Luke 2:11) The announcement of the Angelic messenger was: "For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." This magnificent pronouncement affirms that the Baby lying in a crude feeding trough in a simple animal shed is truly what He is - Christ the Lord, the Savior of the souls of all repentant people. How willingly, how admirably they declared for the whole world to know, that the Baby lying in that crude feeding trough in a simple shed for housing animals was, is, and forever shall be, the Savior. They brought a cherished gift ... the gift of acclamation.

C. The Shepherds who Adored Jesus. (Luke 2:16-17) After the magnificent angelic declaration to them, the shepherds who were caring for their sheep during the night hours "hurried off and found both Mary and Joseph, and the Baby who was lying in the feeding trough. After seeing them, they reported the message they were told about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them." (Luke 2:16-18, HCSB). This is not a secret adoration. In the more familiar language of the King James Version, "they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this Child" (Luke 2:17). No secret disciples here. The implication of the word "abroad" is obviously factual. Without it we would never have gained the knowledge of their gift ... the gift of adoration.

D. The Magi who Acknowledged Jesus. (Matthew 2:11) After enduring the rigors of ancient travel, having come a great distance because they believed the Scriptures, these three men of renown "opened their treasures, (and) presented to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh." (1) They gave to Him the gift given to kings ... gold. (1 Kings 10:2 - The Queen of Sheba presented "very much gold" to King Solomon.) (2) They gave to Him the gift that traditionally was used in anointing for the office of priest ... frankincense. (Exodus 30:34-37 - God's instructions through Moses concerning the anointing oil for the Tabernacle of Testimony.) (3) They gave to Him the gift of purification that was frequently used for preparatory purification and also for anointing for burial ... myrrh. (Esther 2:12 - as Esther was prepared to enter the presence of the king, and in Luke 23:56 anticipating the preparation of the body of Jesus for burial.) While there are many other applicational interpretations that could be mustered to help us gain a broader understanding of the meaning of those special gifts from the "wise men from the East," ... of the priestly office they were ... these three gifts stand out! With gold they acknowledged Him to be the King! With frankincense they acknowledged Him as the interceding Priest! And with myrrh they prophetically acknowledged His sacrifice that He might be our Savior! The pure and holy Lamb of God. To Him they brought the gift of acknowledgment.

There it is then, my dear friends, the Beauty of Christmas!

1. The Simplicity of Christmas! A King Who made a palace out of a crude feeding trough in a simple shed used to house animals! Glory to the newborn King!

2. The Singing of Christmas! A Creator who infused this world with a new song ... the song of the redeemed! Joy to the world! The LORD has come!
3. The Serenity of Christmas! A Ruler who brought the gift of peace to a troubled, confused, self-centered, sinful world! Peace on earth; good will to men!
4. The Splendor of Christmas! A Sovereign who is forever worthy of the best that we have to give to Him!

Now we join with millions around the world and sing that joy-filled Christmas carol penned by John F. Wade in 1751:

“Yea, Lord, we greet Thee, born this happy morning.
O Jesus, to Thee be all glory given.
Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing.
O come, let us adore Him! O come, let us adore Him!
O come, let us adore Him, Christ the Lord.”