

# A Christmas Journey

3-Year Bible Reading Plan

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I love that line that we sang because it comes straight out of Scripture, "Who the Son sets free is free indeed." I know this is the season for a lot of different traditions. One of the traditions that my wife and I have had for almost 23 years of marriage is that we go through the process of the Christmas shopping when we check out, one of the things that we've done for years is that we take the change and we deposit it into the receptacle that usually has somebody outside ringing a bell. Just a way of helping others. Yesterday was the first time this season we actually saw an opportunity to do so. Now this isn't a spiel on different organizations and such, but my wife asked the man a question, she said, "Sir, why haven't we seen y'all this season?" Here's what he said, he said, "We can't find people willing to collect." Now I want you to think about that for a moment. Every store we've gone into, we have come out wanting to give and there's no one to collect. You understand the Lord wants to give you freedom today? He wants to pull you out of bondage today. He wants to set you free, the question is are you here to collect? Are you willing to accept it according to how he has laid it out? He is desiring, he is wanting before your alarm clock ever went off, he wanted to bestow upon you freedom. He has literally come today to give to you so I'm going to ask you an important question: did you come to collect today?

Let's pray.

*Lord, as we continue our time of worship, Lord, you have prepared our hearts, you have challenged us with your word through song, Lord, I pray we would be people that would be willing to collect and not to gather the stuff and the things of this world but to gather what you desire for us, the things that are without price, the sonship with you, the freedom from sin, the release from bondage. Lord, we believe today that you are here to give. May we be of the mindset, may we be in the position and the place to simply collect. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.*

This morning, I want to encourage you to open your Bibles to the Gospel of Matthew 16. As you're turning to Matthew 16, you may be a guest or a visitor with us today and I want to welcome you and I want to invite you to be a part of what we're calling the journey. We've been on this for some months now and we've got a couple of years left where we are just simply and systematically walking through the Scriptures usually about one

chapter a day. Now we began in the book of Genesis and we're going to end in the book of Revelation but between then and now, we're kind of bouncing around quite a bit and I've had a lot of individuals come up to me and kind of wondering what was the methodology, what was the method behind the madness behind it. Well, there are a lot of different reasons we laid it out the way that we did but one of the things that we wanted to strategically do was to have it so that we were walking through, we were reading through one of the Gospel accounts during what we know as the Christmas season, for what we know as the Christmas season has become so inundated with commercialism and materialism and the stuff of this world, we wanted to make sure that we were reading about, we were studying, we were praying through the birth and the life, the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ at this season.

As you walk through the Gospel of Matthew, hopefully you have joined us in this plan, you haven't read what we know as the traditional Christmas story, that's found in Luke 2, but in Matthew 16 I want to invite you to join me on the journey. Now when you think about the journey of Christmas, there are a lot of journeys involved. Mary and Joseph made a journey down to Bethlehem. The wise men made a journey from the East to the Christ child with the gold, the frankincense and the myrrh. Mary and Joseph and Jesus made a journey into Egypt and out thereof. What we know as the famed Christmas story is filled with journeys, however, today I want to take us on a different journey. Starting with chapter 16 of the book of Matthew, I want to walk through a variety of passages in Scripture to show us that what we know as the Christmas story, we sang it in this service, Immanuel, God with us, is more than just the manger scene, it's more than just the time where the wise men came, in fact, we're going to discover today that the Christmas story is an eternal story that is demonstrated for us here in these Scriptures.

Now, I'm going to ask a series of very simple yet important questions today, the questions of who, what, when, where and why. Beginning in verse 13 of chapter 16 of the book of Matthew, it says,

13 When Jesus came into the coasts of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, saying, Whom do men say that I the Son of man am? 14 And they said, Some say that thou art John the Baptist: some, Elias; and others, Jeremias, or one of the prophets. 15 He saith unto them, But whom say ye that I am? 16 And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.

Now the first question we need to ask on our journey of Christmas is the question of who and it may seem like an oversimplified question but it's really not. The question is who is this Jesus of what we know as the Christmas season? Now I think it's very strategic that Jesus takes his disciples to Caesarea Philippi to ask this question. Caesarea Philippi was the place in Jesus' day where all of the faiths, all of the religions, all of the expressions of some type of spirituality would have been expressed in the same place and actually at the same time. Probably the best way to describe it to you and I today, Caesarea Philippi in the Bible was like a coexist convention in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Everybody is present and so Jesus asked a very important question, "Who do all of these guys say that I am?"

I want you to notice the answers. "Well, some think you're John the Baptist. Some think you're Elijah and some think you're Jeremiah." Now that would make perfect sense but I want to parallel that to today because what the disciples are saying is there are a lot of people interested in part of who you are. You see, what we know as John the Baptist, this great religious revolutionary, gathered at the Jordan River, putting the Pharisees and the Sadducees in their place, declaring that we must repent of our sins and turn from our ways. Elijah, the great miracle worker who prayed and it didn't rain for 3 ½ years and then it did, and a lot of things attributed to his ministry. This Jesus of Nazareth would multiple the food, would walk on the water, among many other things. Then there's Jeremiah, Jeremiah the weeping prophet of the Old Testament who was bothered and weeping not just over the spiritual condition of Israel but over the physical condition it placed them in; that their broken relationship with the Lord vertically was destroying their horizontal relationship with others in the ways around them.

It's interesting that those were the three individuals not just because of their personalities but because of their ministries and the parallel today is this: how often do we fall into the trap, particularly this season, of making Jesus just this, or this is the part I like, or this is the Jesus I'm really fond of. Sometimes it's the miracle worker. Sometimes it's the great prophecies that they declared. Or sometimes it's the Jeremiah parallel. But what I want you to notice is that Jesus was not satisfied because he said, "Okay, who do you say that I am?" In other words, what Jesus is saying here is, "Those may be aspects of who I am and there may be some parallels but that doesn't answer the question, who do you say that I am?"

In verse 16 it says Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Now if we go back into the book of Isaiah 9, one of the great Christmas prophecies, "Unto us a child is born. Unto us a son is given." Do you realize that that one verse, though I only quoted part of it, has the Christmas and the Easter story wrapped up? He was born what we know as Christmas, he was given what we know as the Easter season. John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life." When this confession, when this profession is being made, here's what Simon Peter is saying: apart from what we know as the cross, apart from your sacrificial giving of your life for our sins, no other answer will suffice."

You see, this is the season where even sometimes with good intentions we put the name Jesus on everything, but when we answer the "who" question, who is this Jesus, if he is not the one who sacrificed, if he is not the one who provides forgiveness and salvation, then we're only talking about the part and not the whole. The second question from chapter 17 involves the "what," and when I say the "what" of the Christmas story, what all does this entail. You see, shortly after this conversation with the disciples, this event happens in chapter 17, beginning in verse 1. It says,

1 And after six days Jesus taketh Peter, James, and John his brother, and bringeth them up into an high mountain apart, 2 And was transfigured

before them: and his face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light. 3 And, behold, there appeared unto them Moses and Elias talking with him. 4 Then answered Peter, and said unto Jesus, Lord, it is good for us to be here: if thou wilt, let us make here three tabernacles; one for thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elias. 5 While he yet spake, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them: and behold a voice out of the cloud, which said, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him.

A very well-known story and account in the life and the ministry of Jesus Christ as he is transfigured before them, literally his raiment, his countenance appears as the sun, why is this so critical to the "what" question? Because as Immanuel, as God with us, even as the Son who would be given, what Jesus Christ is doing here is he's connecting the dots between what we know as the Old Testament and even the last book of the Bible, the book of Revelation, for it is in the book of Malachi 4 that three characters show up: Moses, Elijah and the coming Messiah, and what's interesting is the description that's given of the Messiah is the s-u-n of righteousness, one of the many reasons why what we know as "Hark, the herald angels sing," is one of my favorite songs, not just Christmas carols, because it says, "Behold, the sun of righteousness."

You get to the book of Revelation 11 and there are these two witnesses that show up that many people defend as Moses and Elijah, but nonetheless when Jesus arrives on the scene in the book of Revelation, his countenance is different, his raiment is different, he is transfigured before them. In other words, what Jesus is addressing here in chapter 17 is the Christmas story that goes beyond the manger. In fact, if you allow me to say it, it even goes beyond the empty tomb. It encompasses even the fact that one day Jesus Christ is going to physically return in what we call his second coming.

Now this last week, thousands of you joined me in the privilege of experiencing what we know as Handel's Messiah. For the first time in 57 years in this place and on this platform, we got to experience that expression of the Christmas story. You may or may not be familiar but Handel's Messiah actually originally is about three hours in length. Those of you that attended, aren't you grateful we only did the Christmas portion this year that was right at one hour? But afterwards, I cannot tell you how many people came up with all kinds of commentary and just how much they loved it and such. I had one "negative" feedback, one encounter, one dialogue of someone who was not really upset as much as they were confused. They came up to me after one of the displays of the story and they said, "Jeff, can I ask you a question?" I said, "Sure." They said, "Why did you only do the Christmas portion?" And I said, "Well, no offense but none of us want to sit here for three hours." He said, "No, no, seriously." He said, "Are you not aware that toward the end of the three hour presentation, there are a couple of beautiful renditions of resurrection songs, and one of the ones is, by the way, one of my personal favorites. It says, 'I know that my Redeemer liveth and one day he shall stand on the earth.'" I said, "Oh, I'm absolutely familiar." Here's what he said, he said, "Jeff, I've heard you say numerous times that without Easter we wouldn't have Christmas, without a resurrection we wouldn't celebrate the birth, so why didn't we sing about the resurrection?" I said,

"Sir, I understand but let me ask you a question." He said, "Sure." I said, "Were you here for the Hallelujah Chorus?" "Of course," he said, "Yes." I said, "You do understand the Hallelujah Chorus is about a second coming, right?" He said, "Well, yeah." And I said, "You can't have a second coming without a resurrection." "Good point. See you later." And he walked off.

The reason I share that with you is the "what," the story of Christmas is so much more than a manger and I know that there is no celebration of Christmas without the recognition of an empty tomb, but when you put those together, guess what? You get the fact that Jesus Christ one day is coming back and so when we talk about the Christmas story, it's the Jesus who forgives and saves and sacrifices and it's so much more than just Luke 2, which begs the next question of when. I don't mean when was the actual date of Christmas or when Jesus is physically returning, the question is when do you and I get it? When does it sink in? When do we actually understand what's happening here and in chapter 18 of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus uses a group of children as a living, breathing illustration and parable, and I want you to notice what happens in verse 4, Jesus says,

4 Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

What Jesus is communicating in an audience of religious leaders and even his own disciples is if we do not humble ourselves, if we're not willing to admit we don't have all the answers, we're never going to get it.

So fast-forward to chapter 19 and I want you to meet a character who I love in Scripture of which I have nothing in common with. He's described as being rich, young and a ruler. But nonetheless, in verse 16 of chapter 19 it says,

16 And, behold, one came and said unto him [that's Jesus], Good Master, what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life? 17 And he said unto him, Why callest thou me good? there is none good but one, that is, God: but if thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments. 18 He saith unto him, Which? Jesus said, Thou shalt do no murder, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, 19 Honour thy father and thy mother: and, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. 20 The young man saith unto him, All these things have I kept from my youth up: what lack I yet?

Push the pause button. Y'all see any humility there? Do you see any humbleness? I mean, he asked Jesus, "Alright, what's the standard?" Jesus said, "Here it is," and he goes, "Oh, I've got this." Let's pick it up in verse 21,

21 Jesus said unto him, If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me. 22 But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful: for he had great possessions. 23 Then said Jesus unto his

disciples, Verily I say unto you, That a rich man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven. 24 And again I say unto you, It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God. 25 When his disciples heard it, they were exceedingly amazed, saying, Who then can be saved? 26 But Jesus beheld them, and said unto them, With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible.

Now allow me just a brief moment here. Jesus Christ is not saying that you have to sell everything, become abjectly poor and have nothing in order to be saved. What Jesus is doing with this rich young ruler is he is exposing his innate sinful disposition and subsequent behavior. I mean, after all, he was proud of the fact he's always honored his mother and father. Those of us who are parents, can we just agree he's lying right there? He says, "I've never defrauded anybody. I've always done all these things." And Jesus says, "Okay, let's go with this one, sell everything you've got, give it away." It says he went away sorrowful because he had many possessions. Let me tell you what Jesus did so masterfully, he pointed out the fact that the 10<sup>th</sup> and the last commandment is, "You shall not covet." In other words, you should not desire the things of this earth more than the things of eternity. He exposed him as not being perfect, as not being able to justify himself, as someone who was just as messed up as everybody else.

So the disciples pulled Jesus aside and said, "Um, we've got a problem because if that guy's not getting in, none of us are." But what Jesus exposed and what he is communicating today, the whole Christmas story of who he is and what's going to take place, when do we get it? Let me tell you when you get it, you finally get it when you realize you don't get it. In other words, when you can't do it; when you realize, "I can never earn it, I can never buy it, I can never deserve it. I will never somehow do enough good or not enough bad to somehow be presentable before the Lord." He used a child to say you must humble yourself. He used a young man to say don't be like him. That's when you get it.

They asked, "Then how can somebody be saved?" And that's where the "where" question, where does that take place? I want to encourage you to go to chapter 20. In chapter 20, Jesus continues this dialogue of his ministry. In verse 17,

17 And Jesus going up to Jerusalem took the twelve disciples apart in the way, and said unto them, 18 Behold, we go up to Jerusalem; and the Son of man shall be betrayed unto the chief priests and unto the scribes, and they shall condemn him to death, 19 And shall deliver him to the Gentiles to mock, and to scourge, and to crucify him: and the third day he shall rise again.

You see, the disciples had asked a very important question, "Then how can anybody ever be saved? If we can't buy it, we can't do it, we've got to be like a child and humble ourselves, how does this happen?" What does Jesus say? I'll show you where it happens, it happens at an empty tomb. That's where it happens. And notice what it says he's willing

to do. He was mocked, he was scourged, he was crucified. That means that Jesus Christ willingly had an entire society make fun of him and mock him because of your sin. Jesus was willing to be scourged and to be beaten and to be spit upon for your sin. He was willing to allow himself to have the nails placed in his hands and his feet and the crown of thorns on his head for your sin.

You see, this is where it takes place, when we realize that he took the punishment that we deserve. And he says on the third day he shall rise again. You see, the "where" question is very important. Salvation doesn't take place when you do a bunch of stuff, salvation doesn't take place when you have a certain percentage of attendance at religious functions, and I want you to hear me clearly and though we would encourage you to give over and above at this season even to our missions offering, there is not enough money you can give or stuff you can give to be saved and forgiven. Apart from an empty tomb and a risen Savior, there is no salvation. They ask, "When does this happen because none of us are worthy?" and Jesus said, "I'll show you where, when the tomb is empty."

You know, when you read through the Gospel accounts, you discover that though the women first laid eyes on Jesus in a resurrected state, they soon thereafter told the disciples and Peter and John actually get in a footrace, they actually race to the empty tomb. Just in case you're curious, that's how we get the idea that Peter probably was a very large guy, it was because John beat him to the tomb. As one who is somewhat thick, I question that logic, but nonetheless, I want you to think about why they ran, because even within the hours before his crucifixion, the disciples as a whole had abandoned him, had betrayed him, had departed from him and they knew they needed that tomb to be empty and we need that tomb to be empty. You know, Peter and John ran to the empty tomb, it makes you kind of question today when we have an invitation and when we have a time of response or when the Lord speaks in our life, why are we so reluctant? Why do we put up so many excuses? Why don't we run just like they did?

In conclusion, this begs the final question from chapter 22, it's the "why" question. Why is it so important? Why is it so important to make sure that we have the right Jesus, if you'll allow me to say? Why is it so important to understand the whole story, not just the nativity set? Why is it important to understand the need for humility and repentance? Why is it necessary to understand the gravity of the empty tomb? Because in verse 41 of chapter 22 it says,

41 While the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them [and we're getting to the point in the story where literally the tables are being turned, no pun intended because in the previous chapter they actually were], 42 [These are the words of Jesus] Saying, What think ye of Christ? whose son is he?

Here's what Jesus is asking, if you're not believing in me, then you tell me about this Messiah you still anticipate. Verse 43,

43 He saith unto them, How then doth David in spirit call him Lord, saying, 44 The LORD said unto my Lord, Sit thou on my right hand, till I make thine enemies thy footstool? 45 If David then call him Lord, how is he his son? 46 And no man was able to answer him a word, neither durst any man from that day forth ask him any more questions.

What Jesus is doing, he's reaching back into Psalm 110:1 where King David under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit makes this great declaration that one day the coming Messiah will sit on his throne for all of eternity. You may not realize this but this verse, Psalm 110:1 that's quoted here in verse 44, is actually the most quoted verse of the Old Testament in your New Testament. You say, "Well, why is that significant? What's the 'why' here?" Because there is coming a day where Jesus Christ himself according to Revelation 19, he's going to split open the skies and when he returns, he does so to reign for all of eternity, and hear me clearly and I'm not trying to be trite, eternity is too long to be wrong, friends. The reason the "why" question is so important is because you're going to stand before Jesus, I'm going to stand before Jesus, we're all going to stand before Jesus one day and given an account and yet how many of us say, "Well, I'll just wait until next week. I'll take care of this next year when the kids are grown, or maybe I get my promotion. I've got a lot of things on my plate right now." I do too. I understand but there's coming a day and I don't know when and you don't know when. In fact, later in Matthew 24, Jesus says not even the angels know but he's going to come and he's going to sit on the throne for all of eternity.

Matthew 25, Jesus uses this illustration about his coming. He says, "Those on my right hand to life everlasting, to those on my left to an eternity of destruction." You see, the Christmas story involves a manger. The Christmas story involves the journey to Bethlehem. The Christmas story involves the wise men or the magi. But that is a part of the story and the "why" of it is because one day the Lord is returning and you're going to stand before him and I'm going to stand before him and the question will not be how many Christmas cards did you give out, the question is not going to be how many parties did you attend, the question is not even going to be – hear me clearly – how much you gave to charitable or mission causes, the question is going to be did you humble yourself, admit that you're the problem and that Jesus is the only answer. That's the "why" of Christmas.

Let's pray with our heads bowed and our eyes closed. You know, maybe today whether on our campus or through the marvel of technology on the internet, maybe you're one of those individuals who you knew the who and the what and the when and such, but you never really contemplated the why, you never really contemplated the gravity for your own life and your own eternity. You know, the Bible says whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved and maybe that's your desire today, maybe that's your heart's cry and you're asking, "Well, how does that happen? What do I need to do?" Can I just encourage you to have a conversation with the Lord? You don't have to have this conversation, you don't have to have this prayer out loud, you don't even have to say necessarily the same words that I might say but maybe your conversation would go a little something like this. "God, today I want to humble myself and I want to admit

something that's very difficult, I'm the problem, but I also want to confess that Jesus Christ is the only solution to my sin problem. God, today I believe that Jesus Christ loved me so much that he was willing to be born on my behalf. I believe that Jesus Christ loved me so much he was willing to live a sinless life on my behalf. I believe that Jesus Christ loved me so much he was willing to pay the price for my sins on his cross. Lord, I believe that when he rose three days later, he made it possible for me to be forgiven and for me to be saved. So today, God, I don't have all the answers but I know that Jesus Christ is the answer to my sin problem. I'm asking you the best way I know how to forgive me and save me. I just want to turn my life over to you."

With our heads still bowed and our eyes still closed, maybe that's the conversation you had with the Lord today. We'd love to have a conversation with you. We'd love to celebrate with you how the Lord has moved in your life. Or maybe you've already had that conversation and maybe you're dealing with the need for baptism or maybe being a part of this great body of believers or maybe there's a struggle, we just want to be a part of it. We'd love to be a part of the conversation with your conversation with the Lord.

*Lord, as we come to this time in our service, how grateful we are for your hand of mercy. In light of where we've been, what we've done over the course of time, we are not worthy to stand before you except for the shed blood and the empty tomb of Jesus Christ. So we pray that however you have used your Holy Spirit to speak into our lives today, may we simply just respond appropriately. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.*

I'm going to ask you to stand with me as our team leads us. Whatever decision, I'll be right here at the front.