

Spelunking Scripture:
Christmas

Exploring Important Passages of the Bible



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Contents



Introduction.....	v
Chapter 1: For Unto Us a Child Is Born.....	1
Poking Holes in the Darkness (Isa. 9:2-7).....	2
A Prophet's Hope (Isa. 9:1-7)	4
Wonderful (Isa. 9:6)	8
Chapter 2: The Birth of Jesus Christ.....	11
Emmanuel (Isa. 7:14, Matt. 1:18-23).....	11
Joseph: Peace (Matt. 1:18-25).....	13
God with Us (Matt. 1:18-25).....	15
Chapter 3: Visit of the Wise Men	19
Gifts for a King (Matt. 2:1-12).....	19
Take Me to the King (Matt. 2:1-12).....	22
The Journey (Matt. 2:1-12)	24
Chapter 4: Joseph Had a Dream	29
Massacre of the Innocents (Matt. 2:13-18).....	29
Tragedy and Consolation (Matt. 2:13-18).....	32
Follow Your Dream (Matt. 2:19-23).....	35
Chapter 5: Zechariah and Elizabeth	39
What the Lord Has Done (Luke 1:5-14, 18-20, 24-25)	39
Hope (Luke 1:5-17)	42
Angels in Advent (Luke 1:5-20).....	45
Chapter 6: The Annunciation	49
Proof of Heaven (Luke 1:26-35).....	50
Nothing Is Impossible with God (Luke 1:26-38).....	52
Angels in Advent: Mary (Luke 1:26-38).....	55
Chapter 7: The Magnificat.....	57
The Things That Make for Peace (Luke 1:39-56).....	58
Clear as Midnight (Luke 1:39-56).....	61
Holy Is His Name (Luke 1:46-49).....	65

Chapter 8: The Birth of Jesus.....	69
Person of the Year (Luke 2:1-7)	69
No Place for Them (Luke 2:1-7).....	73
The Real Spectacle of Christmas (Luke 2:1-7)	76
Chapter 9: Good News	79
The Singing of Angels (Luke 2:8-20)	79
When the Song of the Angels Is Stilled (Luke 2:7-20)	82
Savior, Messiah, Lord (Luke 2:8-14).....	85
Chapter 10: The Word Became Flesh.....	89
No One Has Ever Seen God (Exod. 33:17-23, John 1:17-18).....	89
Who Is Jesus? (John 1:1-18)	92
Grace Like Rain (John 1:14-18)	95
About the Author.....	99

Introduction



Christmas is a big deal—in our culture, in our families, and in our churches. The Christmas season is the most popular holiday of the year. Almost everyone knows about the baby in the manger, except that in some circles, Santa Claus is more popular than Jesus. Still, the Christmas story is largely known. Why then a study of the scripture passages that tell the Christmas story? Is “spelunking scripture” necessary for Christmas? I contend the answer is “yes,” because many people never get beneath the surface of the Christmas story. The basic details may be known, but the deeper meaning of the Christmas story may be undiscovered. That is the purpose of this study—to go beneath the surface of the story to discover what Christmas really means.

You might know that the early Christians did not celebrate Christmas. They knew of the accounts in Matthew and Luke about the birth of Jesus, but their focus was on his death and resurrection, not his nativity. According to Hans Hillerbrand, professor emeritus of history and religion at Duke University, “the actual observance of the day of Jesus’ birth was long in coming. In particular, during the first two centuries of Christianity, there was strong opposition to recognizing birthdays of martyrs, or, for that matter, of Jesus.”¹ The early Church Fathers considered celebrating birthdays a pagan custom. Saints and martyrs were honored on the days of their martyrdom, which were considered their true “birthdays.”

We are not sure how December 25 became the date of Jesus’ birth. It may have been connected with a popular Roman holiday that celebrated the winter solstice. The first “Christ Mass” in the Roman Catholic Church occurred centuries later, and many of the other Christmas traditions developed over time. The Puritans in colonial New England resisted celebrating Christmas altogether, because the custom of exchanging Christmas gifts between family members and friends had secular overtones.

The story of the birth of Jesus is absent in Mark’s gospel, and is only alluded to in the prologue to John’s gospel. Matthew began his nativity story with the genealogy of Jesus and the surprising revelation that his mother Mary was with child from the Holy Spirit, before she and Joseph were married. The actual birth of Jesus is described in Matthew in a single verse (1:25). It is Luke’s gospel that fills in the details about the angelic annunciation to Mary, her “Magnificat” response, the trip to Bethlehem, the birth in a barnyard, laying the baby in a manger because (as the Christmas carol says) there was “no crib for a bed,” the angelic annunciation to the shepherds, and the shepherds’ going with haste to find Mary and Joseph and the child.

Not surprisingly, most of the focus in spelunking Christmas is on Luke’s gospel, although Matthew’s brief account of Jesus’ birth and the subsequent visit of the wise men is often included in the story. Also, the prophecy from Isaiah 9 about a child being born for us is included, especially since it was put to music in Handel’s *Messiah*. Finally, the prologue to John’s gospel about the Word being made flesh and living among us provides a theological underpinning to the Christmas story.

The methodology of spelunking scripture is to briefly introduce each pertinent scripture passage related to the Christmas story, and then to illustrate each passage with studies gleaned from sermons that seek to make a connection between the text and life today. Needless to say, as a pastor who served the same church for 33 years, I preached on the various Christmas passages many times. Do the math: With four Sundays in Advent, and the candlelight service on Christmas Eve, and Epiphany Sunday, I had many opportunities to explore what the Christmas story might mean for us. Yet, even though the Christmas story was well known to most people in my congregation, there was always something “new” to say, because the story continues to speak to the changing contexts of our lives.²

This study is part of the Bible study series *Spelunking Scripture*. Other individual volumes will explore passages from the Gospels (not including the nativity and resurrection stories), the letters of Paul, the Acts of the Apostles and the general epistles of the New Testament, and the Old Testament. There is also *Spelunking Scripture—Easter*, which will explore the accounts of the resurrection in the Gospels. The current volume explores passages from Isaiah, Matthew, Luke, and John related to the birth of Jesus.

Almost everyone in our culture knows about Christmas, but do we know what Christmas means? Let us explore together these important scripture passages to move beneath the surface to the underlying messages for our lives.

NOTES

¹Hans J. Hillerbrand's quote comes from www.brittanica.com/topic/Christmas.

²Each study for a given passage contains both new insights and familiar commentary.