



# Coming of Christmas



“Christmas” is typically defined as “the annual celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ.”<sup>1</sup>

## Why Do We Celebrate?

- ❑ People answer this question in various ways.<sup>2</sup> For example: It’s a legal holiday on the calendar. It’s a family tradition. It’s part of the culture in which I live. It’s a good time. Christians might say, “I celebrate Christmas because I truly like to celebrate Jesus’ birth!”
- ❑ Various holidays (feasts, festivals) are prescribed in the Bible, but they are limited to Old Testament holidays related to Israel’s history. While Christmas is *not* prescribed in the Bible, the majority of Christians think celebrating Christ’s birth (or coming) is a good thing.<sup>3</sup>

## What Do We Celebrate?

- ❑ People answer this question in various ways. People may “celebrate” time off from work, enjoyable gatherings with family and friends, special events, or the increased valuing of peace, generosity and goodwill among people. Many businesses celebrate higher revenues.<sup>4</sup>
- ❑ While Christians can also enjoy the things mentioned above, those who choose to celebrate Christmas emphasize the *Christ* in Christmas. Christmas is the celebration of Jesus Christ’s birth (or coming). We will talk more about this in the next lesson – *Coming of Christ*.

## When Do We Celebrate?

- ❑ According to most calendars, Christmas day is on December 25, though some Orthodox Christians celebrate Christmas on January 7.<sup>5</sup> Some people celebrate “the 12 days of Christmas,” which extends from December 25 to January 5, the day before Epiphany.<sup>6</sup> And you may have noticed that some people start “celebrating” immediately after Thanksgiving!
- ❑ Special days (or weeks) of celebration are fine, but the significance of Christ’s coming should never be neglected or forgotten. We should be praising God throughout the year!

## How Do We Celebrate?

- ❑ People celebrate or observe Christmas in various ways. Activities include parties, special events (e.g., concerts, plays, parades), caroling (singing Christmas songs), family gatherings and traditions, gift giving, Scripture readings, Christmas Eve services, etc.
- ❑ How should we celebrate? Maybe we can learn something from some of the people who came into contact with Jesus soon after his birth.

<sup>1</sup> While this is the primary definition of ‘Christmas,’ many observances of the holiday neglect or exclude Jesus Christ. Thus some dictionaries now include a secular definition of ‘Christmas,’ such as ‘a legal holiday and an occasion for greetings and gift-giving.’

<sup>2</sup> Of course, many people (including some Christians) don’t observe Christmas for various reasons.

<sup>3</sup> Several of the Old Testament holidays were prescribed to remember and celebrate significant events in the history of God’s people. Certainly, the birth of Jesus Christ is a significant event in the history of God’s people! However, since it’s not prescribed in the Bible, some Christians have chosen *not* to observe Christmas. Some Christians and groups have strongly rejected it. Factors may include association with pagan origins and traditions (e.g., Saturnalia), or the commercialism or secularization of the holiday along with its promotion of consumerism.

<sup>4</sup> I’m somewhat serious. For many businesses, sales during the holiday season are a major part of annual revenues.

<sup>5</sup> This date is based on the Julian calendar. Orthodox Christians who use the Gregorian calendar celebrate Christmas on December 25. We don’t know the actual date of Jesus’ birth.

<sup>6</sup> ‘Epiphany’ is the celebration of the revelation of Christ to the world, particularly to the Magi (*Matthew 2:1-12*).

## What Did the Shepherds Do?

📖 “While [Joseph & Mary] were [in Bethlehem], the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger,<sup>7</sup> because there was no guest room available for them. And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night.” (Luke 2:6-8, NIV)

📖 An angel appeared to them and said, “Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” (Luke 2:11-12, NIV).<sup>8</sup>



1. Read Luke 2:15-20. What did the shepherds do?

## What Did Anna Do?

📖 “When the time came for the purification rites required by the Law of Moses, Joseph and Mary took [Jesus] to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord.”<sup>9</sup> (Luke 2:22, NIV)

☐ A woman named Anna was at the temple. She was a prophetess, elderly widow, and devoted worshiper of God.<sup>10</sup> Anna came up to Joseph, Mary, and Jesus.

2. Read Luke 2:38.<sup>11</sup> What did Anna do?

## What Did the Magi Do?

📖 “After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi<sup>12</sup> from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, ‘Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.’” (Matthew 2:1-2, NIV)

☐ After an encounter with King Herod, the Magi continued in their search for the child.

3. Read Matthew 2:9-11. What did the Magi do?



## What Should We Do?

4. Considering the examples of the shepherds, Anna, and the Magi, in what ways should we celebrate the coming of Jesus Christ into the world?<sup>13</sup>

<sup>7</sup> ‘manger’ (*phatnē*) – feeding trough, normally used for animals

<sup>8</sup> ‘Savior’ (*sōtēr*) – rescuer or deliverer, in both the physical and spiritual senses. ‘Messiah’ (*christos* – ‘anointed one,’ ‘Christ’) – the great king who would deliver God’s people and establish God’s rule (kingdom).

<sup>9</sup> The Old Testament law prescribed a purification ceremony 40 days after childbirth (*Leviticus 12:2-4, 6-8*). So Joseph and Mary went to the temple to offer a sacrifice for Mary’s purification, and to dedicate their firstborn.

<sup>10</sup> As a ‘prophetess’ Anna was a vessel for revelation from God. Anna’s devotion was shown by her constant presence in the temple court. ‘she never left the temple’ (2:37) does not necessarily mean she actually lived there, but it stresses her life’s passion and occupation during her waking hours.

<sup>11</sup> ‘redemption of Jerusalem’ refers to the redemption of Israel which the Messiah would bring in fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies. But Jesus was not just Israel’s savior; he is the Savior of the world! (*Luke 2:29-32*)

<sup>12</sup> ‘Magi’ (*magoi*) – the term covered a variety of men interested in astronomy, astrology, dreams, magic, and books. These men could be considered ‘wise men’ (ESV). They may have visited Jesus up to 20 months after his birth.

<sup>13</sup> Maybe you cannot truly celebrate Jesus’ coming because you don’t believe in him. I encourage you, as the Magi responded to the revelation they received, and sought to find the promised King, keep seeking and responding. As the popular saying goes, ‘Wise men [and women] still seek him.’