

CHRISTMAS ESSENTIALS

The Incredible Story of the Birth of Our Savior

Some things about Christmas must *never* be forgotten.

Introduction

How many times have we heard the Christmas story of the birth of Jesus? Perhaps too many times to count. We've read it in children's books, we've watched it expressed in movies, we've heard it shared at church, we sing about it in songs, and we see nativity scenes everywhere. We can tell the story in our sleep.

The problem is that we have become so familiar with the Christmas story that it has lost its wonder. We have grown cold and calloused to its message, and we have forgotten its significance in the history of mankind. The commercialism of Christmas has eclipsed the Christ of Christmas.

For example, if we were to ask people, "What are the essentials of Christmas," some might suggest Christmas trees, ornaments, music, lights, decorations, candy, gifts, or other items they equate with the season. But are these things really the essentials of Christmas? No, they are evidence that we have been conditioned by our culture to think of these things at this time of the year.

While all of these things are fun (and there is nothing inherently wrong about any of them), they are not the true essentials of Christmas. The true essentials of Christmas are the details of the story that we all love but have lost in our retelling of it. There are several aspects of Jesus' birth that are absolutely necessary to note. These details must be included and understood to appreciate all that took place on that holy night when Christ our Savior was born. What follows are twenty details that are all critical to the story. They are the true essentials of Christmas. *Some things about Christmas must never be forgotten (Luke 1:1-4).*

Read *Matthew 1:1-16* and *Luke 3:23-38*.

Essential #1

Jesus Had to Be a Descendant of David

Matt. 1:1-16, 20; Luke 1:27, 32, 33, 69; 2:3, 4, 11; 3:23-38

The New Testament includes two genealogies of Jesus (which most people skip over), the point of which is to demonstrate that He is connected to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and eventually King David. It was prophesied that the Messiah would come from the house or lineage of David (*2 Sam. 7:12-16*). Joseph is a descendant of King David. While Jesus is not the blood of Joseph, Joseph was Jesus' adopted and symbolic father. Mary, too, was a descendant of David, so Jesus was in his lineage on both sides (*Rom. 1:3; Rev. 22:16*). Jesus is the rightful heir of the throne of David, set to rule for eternity.

Next, read *Luke 1:5-25*.

Essential #2

Jesus Had to Follow John

Mark 1:1-3; Luke 1:1-25, 36, 37, 39-45, 57-66, 76

While the birth of Jesus is the most important, we must not overlook the birth of John the Baptist. Why did the Gospel writers include him in the Christmas story? John is an essential element because it was prophesied that the arrival of the Messiah would be preceded by a messenger, a prophet like Elijah (*Isa. 40:3; Mal. 3:1; 4:5, 6; Matt. 3:3*). The writers of the New Testament are identifying this messenger so that we will know for sure that Jesus is the promised Messiah. All who heard about John's miraculous birth were spreading the news, saying, "What will this child turn out to be?" (*Luke 1:66*). "It is he who will go as a forerunner before Christ, in the spirit and power of Elijah" (v.17, 76).

Next, read *Luke 1:26-38*.

Essential #3

Jesus Had to Be Born of a Woman

Matt. 1:18; Luke 1:24-38; 2:5-7; Gal. 4:4

The fact that Jesus was born of a woman may seem obvious, at first, so obvious that it doesn't need to be mentioned. Haven't all people been born of a woman? Yes, and that's the point. Jesus is like us, a human being. In order for Him to mediate between us and God, Jesus had to be human (*1 Tim. 2:5*). He was not an alien or an angel; rather He was flesh and blood.

But, it's more than that. The fact that Jesus was born of a woman fulfilled prophecy. After the fall of Adam, God prophesied to the serpent that He would end his curse through a woman. One of her children would defeat Satan (*Gen. 3:15*). God also promised Abraham that through him all the people of the earth would be blessed (*Gen. 22:18*). Both of these prophecies were fulfilled in Jesus' natural birth (*Gal. 3:16, 29; 4:4*).

Essential #4

Jesus Had to Be Born of a Virgin

Isa. 7:14; 9:1-7; Matt. 1:18, 23; Luke 1:27, 34

Jesus' birth was miraculous, of course, something only God could do. Virgins do not get pregnant and have babies! The significance of the virgin birth is that Jesus was not the offspring of a human father. If Jesus was of human origin, then He would have only been human. He would not have been the divine Son of God.

Also, Jesus had to avoid the sinful nature that is inherited from Adam (*Rom. 5:12; 1 Pet. 2:22; 1 John 3:5*). If Jesus inherited Adam's fallen nature, then He would've been sinful and, therefore, unable to be a perfect sacrifice to save us from sin. The virgin birth sets Christ apart from every other person in history.

Essential #5

Jesus Had to Be Conceived by the Holy Spirit

Matt. 1:18, 20; Luke 1:31, 32, 35

While Jesus had to be born of a woman (in order to be human), He could not have been the offspring of a man (see previous essential). Jesus had to be conceived by the Holy Spirit in order to be divine. Thus, He is called the Son of God. He has a heavenly origin, and because He is divine by nature, He can represent God in the mediation of men (*1 Tim. 2:5*). Jesus is the only person who could represent both sides – as the God-man (called the Hypostatic Union) – and restore the relationship between both parties.

Essential #6

Jesus Was Born to Young Parents

Luke 1:7, 18, 27, 34, 36

Have you ever noticed that Luke emphasized the age of John's parents several times. Obviously, he did not want the reader to miss the miracle of his birth, that Elizabeth had a child in her old age.

However, there is a deeper symbolism here. John was the last of the Old Testament prophets. He represented an old system and prepared people for a new system (New Testament). The Old Testament was represented in John's old parents (and in Simeon and Anna, who met Mary and Joseph in the Temple), while the New Testament is represented in Jesus' young parents.

Continue reading *Luke 1:57-2:5*.

Essential #7

Jesus Had to Be Born in the Roman Empire

Luke 2:1, 3; Gal. 4:4

While the Romans are often overlooked in the Christmas story, they are essential to the plot. Prior to Jesus' birth, the Romans subjugated the known world through conquest. They ruled it with an iron fist. For the first time in a while, the world

was at peace (a period called the *Pax Romana*). As a result, the Romans united all nations with one authority, one law, and one language (Latin), and they made the roads and seaways safe to travel.

All of this occurred because of the visionary and stable rule of Caesar Augustus, who came to power in 31 BC. It was Augustus who ordered a census to be taken throughout the empire, so that he could apportion taxation. Because of that command, everyone had to return to his city of origin, and, of course, it was this order that prompted Joseph and Mary to go to Bethlehem. Without the Romans, Jesus would have most likely been born in Nazareth. (Note: The Romans also play a key role in the death of Jesus.)

Essential #8

Jesus Had to Be Born in Bethlehem

Matt. 2:1-6, 8, 16; Luke 2:1, 4, 11, 15

Bethlehem became known as the “city of David” (*1 Sam. 17:12*) because David’s father, Jesse, and family lived there. Also, the prophets foretold that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem (*Micah 5:2*). To identify Jesus as the Messiah, he had to be born in that city.

Continue reading *Luke 2:6, 7*.

Essential #9

Jesus Had to Be Male

Isa. 9:1-7; Matt. 1:1, 20, 26; Luke 1:31; 2:7, 23

At first, this may seem sexist, but it’s not. The fact that Jesus was a male is important, even for females. First, Jesus had to be a man to rule as a King on the throne of David (*Isa. 9:6*). Second, to be the spotless lamb for the sacrifice for sin, Jesus had to be a male (*Ex. 12:5*).

Third, as the first man, Adam represented all human beings. As the Second Adam, Jesus will represent all people before God as their mediator (*1 Cor. 15:21, 22, 42-49*). In Adam, death came as

a result of sin; as the Second Adam, life came as a result of Jesus’ death and resurrection. Finally, Jesus had to be a man in order to reveal the Father to us. “If we have seen Him, we have seen the Father” (*John 1:14, 18; 1 John 1:1*).

Essential #10

Jesus Had to Be a Firstborn

Luke 2:7, 22-24; Gal. 4:4-7

According to the Law, the firstborn males were holy to the Lord (*Luke 2:23*). Jesus had to be a firstborn to inherit all that the Father could give Him, all of which we will receive as adopted sons and fellow heirs (*Gal. 4:4-7*).

Essential #11

Jesus Had to Be Laid in a Manger

Luke 2:7, 12, 16

Luke tells us in his Gospel that the town of Bethlehem was crowded (because of the census) and there was no room for Mary and Joseph to stay. Thus, they stayed in a place for animals and baby Jesus was laid in a manger. In other words, the world did not welcome Him with open arms. There was no fanfare or parade. He was not born in extravagant wealth behind gates of gold. He was born in the lowliest of places. He humbled Himself in order to be born among men (*2 Cor. 8:9; Phil. 2: 5-8*). Jesus would be accessible to all people, rich and poor. He is the Savior of all.

Continue reading *Luke 2:8-20*.

Essential #12

Jesus Had to Be Born at Night

Luke 2:8, 32; Acts 26:23

From the beginning of the Bible to the end, there is a tremendous theme of light and darkness. The world lay trapped in spiritual darkness, enslaved in Satan’s dominion, until the light of the world was born, the Messiah who would set them free (*John 1:4; 8:12; Col. 1:13*). The prophets foretold that

the Messiah would be “a light unto the nations,” (*Isa. 9:2*) that “those who walked in darkness would see a great light” (*Isa. 42:6*). Also, don’t miss the importance of the star! How appropriate that Jesus was born at night and that those shepherds who “kept watch over their flocks by night” saw a bright light announcing the birth of the Savior in Bethlehem.

Essential #13

Jesus Had to Be Worshiped by Shepherds

Luke 2:8-20

The first people to worship the baby Jesus were shepherds from nearby fields. After the angels announced His birth, they found the baby in Bethlehem. Since He was in a manger, He was easy to spot. Jesus would be the Savior of all people, beginning with the Jews. The Shepherds would’ve been Jews. They would’ve also represented the poorest of the poor. This Savior is for everyone. How appropriate also that Jesus will be described as the Great Shepherd (*John 1:1-21; Psalm 23; 1 Peter 5:4*).

Now read *Luke 2:21-40*.

Essential #14

Jesus Had to Be Named “Jesus”

Matt. 1:21, 26; Luke 1:31; 2:10, 11, 21, 30

The name Jesus is the Greek word for the Hebrew name Joshua (Yeshua). It was a common name in that day, as John is today. So then, why was Jesus given His name? Mary and Joseph named the boy Jesus because that is what they were instructed to do by the angel. The reason the angel gave for the name was that “He would save His people from their sins.” Jesus’ name means “Savior.” His name captured the mission and purpose of His life.

Essential #15

Jesus Had to Be Born Under the Law

Luke 2:21-24, 27, 39; Gal. 4:4, 5

For men to be in fellowship with God, they must be perfect or holy. They must meet all of God’s standards in His law (the Law of Moses). No one has ever been able to do that (because of sin), but Jesus did, even from birth. In His sinless life, Jesus would earn the right to be the mediator between God and men (*1 Tim. 2:5*). Through His perfect sacrifice, He earned for us what none of us could do on our own. He did not “come to abolish the Law but to fulfill it” (*Matt. 5:17*). Now, we simply must believe in Christ by faith.

Essential #16

Jesus Was Born to Die

Luke 2:34, 35

Simeon, an elderly man at the temple, who had been waiting for the arrival of the Messiah, prophesied about Jesus to Mary and Joseph. His words both amazed and troubled them. Simeon predicted that Jesus’ message of salvation would divide the Jews. Some would follow Him and some would reject Him. He also predicted that Mary’s heart would be grieved because she would witness the crucifixion of her son on the cross. The whole purpose of Jesus’ life was to be a substitutionary sacrifice for sinful humanity. He was born in the manger to die on the cross.

Now read *Matthew 2:1-12*.

Essential #17

Jesus Had to Be Worshiped by the Wise Men

Matt. 2:1-12

The shepherds and wise men are essentials in the Christmas story. The shepherds represented the poor while the magi or kings represented the wealthy (see their gifts). The shepherds were Jews, but the magi were Gentiles. Jesus is both the Great Shepherd and the King of Kings. Jesus is the

Savior of all people. Simeon highlighted this truth in his prophecy, that Jesus was “a light to the Gentiles.”

Note, also, the magi’s gifts – gold, frankincense, and myrrh. While there is not much said about these gifts in Scripture, they are certainly symbolic of the Lord. Gold was the most valuable commodity in that time. Frankincense was used in the Temple for prayer, and myrrh or gall was used to mix in drinks to help with pain and suffering. Both frankincense and myrrh were used to prepare the dead for burial.

Essential #18

Jesus Had to Be Born in Herod’s Reign

Matt. 2:1-8, 13, 15-18

Herod the Great was known as a tyrannical ruler, one who was cruel, harsh, and paranoid. He was jealous of others, especially if they were threats to his throne. When the magi arrived, looking for the new King, Herod’s anger boiled. Because he felt threatened, he ordered all babies killed in Bethlehem. But, because of that order, Joseph took Mary and Jesus to Egypt.

Next, read *Matthew 2:13-15*.

Essential #19

Jesus Had to Go to Egypt

Matt. 2:13-15, 19, 20

When Herod ordered the babies in Bethlehem killed, Joseph took Mary and Joseph to Egypt. They had to get as far away from Herod’s reach as possible. Their time in Egypt was also prophesied (*Hosea 11:1*). Why the Lord wanted Jesus to spend time there, we don’t know. Somehow in His plan and purposes, it will make sense.

Finally, read *Matthew 2:16-23*.

Essential #20

Jesus Had to Grow Up in Nazareth

Matt. 2:20-23; Luke 1:26; 2:4, 39

While there is no mention of the city of Nazareth in the Old Testament, it is important that Jesus is raised there. He will be identified as the Nazarene (*Matt. 2:23; Mark 1:24; Luke 4:34; Acts 22:8*). Evidently, Nazareth is a lowly place, one scorned by the people of Israel. They said of the city, “Can anything good come from Nazareth?” (*John 1:46*).

However, there is a hint hidden in a single prophecy of Isaiah. He foretold that “a shoot would come from the stump of Jesse,” a new branch from the line of David (*Isa. 11:1*). Here is a prophecy of Jesus. The word Nazareth in Hebrew means “shoot.” Here again we have the fact that the Messiah did not come from a place of honor or glory but a place of humility and scorn.

Conclusion

The birth of Jesus Christ fulfilled a number of prophecies. Every detail had to be carefully planned. God pays attention to details and all of these things happened for a reason, not by accident. They were part of His plan and purposes.

The only way to know beforehand that these things would happen and then to make them happen the way He wanted to is that God has to know the beginning and the end. God is sovereign and eternal. He sits outside of time and space and He knows and controls all things. He “works all things together for good” (*Romans 8:28*), “after the counsel of His own will” (*Ephesians 1:11*).

These details are essential to the Christmas story. We must not forget their importance. But, most importantly, we must not lose sight of the wonder of Jesus’ arrival. Jesus is the Messiah! The baby born that night is the Savior of the world! Don’t miss the most essential aspect of Christmas.