



## Christmas Eve

Matt Chandler – December 24, 2004

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At the time of the birth of Christ, the Jews were probably at one of their darkest hours. After 400 years of silence from God, an angel appears to this little girl. What a strange way to start the whole thing, you know. 600 years of promises, 600 years of songs, 600 years of anticipation and you break the news to a 15 year old girl? No offense, but I've known some 15 year old girls. Yet that's how the news comes to the earth. Promises are about to be fulfilled. The great promise that light would be shone, people would finally be healed and what ailed the universe was about to be removed. In an instant, this 15 year old girl hears that it will be through her body that the Son of God comes into the world. She hears this news and is completely blown away by the whole deal. The angel shows up, goes, "You're going to give birth," Mary's a very practical young woman and goes, "How is that possible?" The angel goes, "The Holy Spirit of God handle it." And then she sings this song. This is no ordinary 15 year old girl. She sings this beautiful, powerful, amazing song. The song is found in Luke 1. It reads like this, "*My soul exalts the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior. For He has had regard for the humble state of His bondservant; for behold, from this time on all generations will count me blessed. For the Mighty One has done great things for me; and holy is His name. AND HIS MERCY IS UPON GENERATION AFTER GENERATION TOWARD THOSE WHO FEAR HIM. He has done mighty deeds with His arm; He has scattered those who were proud in the thoughts of their heart.*" That's an interesting little phrase right there because it says He doesn't destroy the proud, He just scatters the proud. How does He scatter the proud? In their own heart. So while they think of their own greatness, they are scattered. "*He has brought down rulers from their thrones, and has exalted those who were humble. HE HAS FILLED THE HUNGRY WITH GOOD THINGS; and sent away the rich empty-handed. He has given help to Israel His servant, in remembrance of His mercy, as He spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and his descendants forever.*" So we're here to celebrate this thing that started before Genesis 1. It started with this blaze of glory in Genesis 1. It was this beautiful, amazing plan. It took a pretty bad detour in Genesis 3. But in Genesis 12, God sets forth a plan of redemption. That's why we're here tonight.

Let me pray for us, and then we'll get after it. "Father, I thank You for these men and women. I don't know how we came in here tonight. I don't know if we came in here knowing You or if we came in here out of tradition. I don't know if we walked in this room because we love You and our hearts are filled with gratitude for our salvation or we're here tonight because it's what we do in Christmas Eve. But I ask tonight that You wouldn't let this thing be routine to us, that You wouldn't let this be just another Christmas, that You wouldn't let this be just singing and candles. I ask that You might stir our hearts tonight and that we would leave this place thinking about where might be without You or thinking about where we might get with You. Would You use something as simple as a candlelight service with the attention on the birth of Your Son to maybe

restore hope that's been lost? Maybe give us the strength to keep going tonight and keep seeking tonight. Remind us of Your greatness tonight, God, and may the awe of it bring us joy. It's for Your beautiful name we pray. Amen."

*"The people who walk in darkness will see a great light; those who live in a dark land, the light will shine on them. You shall multiply the nation, You shall increase their gladness; they will be glad in Your presence as with the gladness of harvest, as men rejoice when they divide the spoil. For You shall break the yoke of their burden and the staff on their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, as at the battle of Midian. For every boot of the booted warrior in the battle tumult, and cloak rolled in blood, will be for burning, fuel for the fire. For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; and the government will rest on His shoulders; and His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. There will be no end to the increase of His government or of peace, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness from then on and forevermore the zeal of the LORD of hosts will accomplish this." ~ Isaiah 9:2-7,*

**Paul Matthies:** We come tonight to worship the long awaited Messiah. For us, the Christmas story begins with a humble manger. But if you were to ask any of the *Hasidim* or the Zealots or the *Sicarii* or any of the Jewish resistance groups under the Roman occupation, they would tell you that this story is going to end with a sword. You see, for 600 years, the Jewish people had lived under the oppression of several different regimes. First it was the Babylonian Exile under the rule of king Nebuchadnezzar. He would take them away from their families, and he would take their warriors and make them their own. And they would live in a foreign land until finally Cyrus the Great of Persia would come and rescue the people. They would call him the "anointed one," and they could go home and rebuild their temple. But it wouldn't be long until the Greeks, under Alexander the Great, would come and sweep through Persia and call the land of Judea their own. The Ptolemys and Seleucids would establish cruel regimes that would operate under jealousy and hatred and spitefulness. And finally the Jewish people had enough when Antiochus Epiphanes went to sacrifice a pig on the altar and a Jewish priest named Mattathias would come with his son Judah Maccabee "The Hammer." And they would take the sword and they would revolt. . .and they would win. And they would established the Hasmonean empire. But it wouldn't be long before the Jewish kings became just as the Gentile kings, cruel and unjust. So the Jewish people would welcome the Roman Empire as they came over the hills. And Pompey would take the sword, march into Jerusalem and claim it for the Roman Empire. He then established Herod the Great as tetrarch. Now this was a slap in the face to the Jewish people because Herod was an Idumaeen. He was half Edomite and half Jew. And surely God had hated Esau but loved Jacob; how could an Edomite be king? So again, there was cruelty and oppression. The Jewish people began to wonder, "What sort of King of Glory will come? What sort of Messiah will we have? With a powerful sword? And it says that He'll be a Wonderful Counselor, mighty in battle with the strength of God, whose rule will last forever and finally free us from our oppression."

And that finally brings us back to the manger. With God, you have to learn to expect the

unexpected. Jesus of Galilee said, "I have come to bring a sword." But you see, a sword was different. He would wield a spiritual sword and wage war against the forces of darkness. He would be Mighty God, God in the flesh, God incarnate, who would conquer death. And His reign would bring peace, not earthly peace but peace between God and man. And no one would have ever expected that the Messiah, who had a chance at a great sword, would take His sword and trade it for the cross. And that's the Messiah that we've come to worship tonight.

*"Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: when His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit. And Joseph her husband, being a righteous man and not wanting to disgrace her, planned to send her away secretly. But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. "She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins." Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "BEHOLD, THE VIRGIN SHALL BE WITH CHILD AND SHALL BEAR A SON, AND THEY SHALL CALL HIS NAME IMMANUEL," which translated means, "GOD WITH US." And Joseph awoke from his sleep and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took Mary as his wife, but kept her a virgin until she gave birth to a Son; and he called His name Jesus." ~ Matthew 1:18-25*

*"My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world." ~ 1 John 2:1-2*

**Barry Keldie:** Last week I found myself where probably many of you found yourselves, at a relative's house, surrounded by children and toys that speak different languages, like Dora the Explorer, who seems to be smarter than me. We were at Charity's parent's house, and there kids everywhere knee deep in wrapping paper. Charity's father has a tradition. He takes all the children in the family and sits them around a nativity scene and tells them the story of Jesus' birth. I had heard the hype about the story, so I got my place amongst the kids to sit down and hear what happened. He began to tell the story and he used a nativity set that he actually made when he was younger. He told of the shepherds and how they were unworthy to be the first ones to be told. He told of Mary and how she was unworthy to be the mother of Jesus. He told of the baby Jesus and what He really deserved and what He took. He told of what we deserve and what we get. And I was looking around and saw these kids paying attention to this father telling children the meaning of Christmas. And then on the other side, you have a Christmas tree and everything. And I thought, "What's the big deal about the birth? What's so huge about the birth of Jesus that tomorrow morning, whether you believe in God or not, you're celebrating Christmas? Everyone is. So what's the big deal about the birth?" I mean, I know the big deal about the cross. The big deal about the cross is the Bible says that I need to be perfect to get into heaven, I need to be flawless to go to heaven and I'm not. And so Jesus was born and lived a perfect life, sinless, and died on that cross so that I

don't have to be perfect. I know that the big deal about the cross is for me to be justified, for me to be made right in the eyes of God, for me to be made perfect. So I know why Easter is a big deal to us. So I was wondering what the big deal about the birth was. So Charity and I got in the car and we began to drive home and the Christmas story came up. The key to birth is found in Matthew. At the end of that Scripture it says that His name will be Emmanuel, which means "God with us." And the big deal about the birth, the reason Christmas is such a big deal is because when Jesus, God the Son wrapped our sinful, nasty flesh around Him and walked on this earth, we're not just justified, but Galatians 4 says we're adopted. I don't just get to see and talk to God, I can call Him "Father." Galatians 4:6 says that He has put the Spirit of His Son in us to call Him, "Abba," which literally means "Daddy." The big deal about the birth is He is with us. The Creator of all things is for you. He knows you, He knows me and He loves us anyway. Let's praise God that we're made right. Let's praise God that He calls us friends. But let's worship Jesus because we're heirs, we're children.

**Matt Chandler:** I believe it was Thoreau that said we are into a sea of conflict. That was Thoreau's way of trying to explain this angst that exists in the human soul. Thoreau was not a devout religious man but just an observer of mankind. The Bible explains it this way. In Ecclesiastes 3:11, it says that God has placed eternity in the hearts of men so that they might seek Him. Now it's a problematic text because it just said that there is something inside of us that nothing that is temporal can satisfy. There is something inside of us that the Bible is just going to call eternity that, no matter what we can gather on earth, cannot be satisfied. If it can burn, disappear, be taken from us or one day cease to exist, it can never satisfy the deepest parts of our soul. Now I'm 30, so coming from me, that's got to sound pretty arrogant and weird, right? If I'm 92 and have lived life, then maybe I can say that, but the reality is I started shaving every other day about six months ago. So I don't have a lot of authority on which to stand here tonight. I only have history as a witness that what the Bible says is correct.

Let me try to prove it to you. An American icon of beauty and sexuality was a woman by the name of Marilyn Monroe. There are still posters you can buy of her in a white dress where it's floating it up and she's holding it down. Now, go to her grave. Is beauty still there? Or how about this. Was her beauty enough to satisfy her here on earth? In fact, it almost seems strange that some of the more beautiful people also have issues. And yet we chase it with all our might. We chase beauty whether that means we spend all of our time in a gym or get an "Extreme Makeover." We chase it and pursue it, and yet it still doesn't satisfy. Which is why we give up, quit going to the gym and like pie. Or how about some kind of glory or athletic success? Maybe something like that will satisfy. Well, It doesn't appear that it does. Eventually, all the crowds stop cheering and after a while, nobody knows who you are anymore. So athletic success or glory, it doesn't satisfy; it doesn't fill the chasm of eternity. In fact, it seems like it just creates more. Well how about money? We could ask Mr. Rockefeller, except all his money has been divvied up among all his great-great-grandkids. How about brains? Maybe it's the intellect. Well Einstein right now, his brain is in a jar at Harvard, which I've always found to be peculiar, and he's dead. So money, power, beauty, fame, success, none of it fills this hole in us because none of it is eternal. So do you understand what Thoreau

means when he says that we were born into a sea of conflict? We are born into a world where nothing in that world will be able to satisfy us. And listen, I wish we could have done this at my house tonight, but that would have just been weird. Because I don't want to talk to you as some pastor tonight. I just want to talk to you as an observer of humanity. Surely you know I'm not lying. If we were all okay, then Oprah Winfrey would not have a job. If we're okay, then there's no such thing as *Barnes & Noble*. If we're all okay, there's no bookstores. Because 90% of their revenue is birthed out of self-help books. We're broken. Everybody knows it. Good Lord, most people are getting rich off of it.

So right now, maybe we're going, "Hey man, it's Christmas Eve. Where's the happy stuff? Where's the manger and the baby?" Unfortunately, it gets worse before it gets better tonight. It gets worse than the idea that we are we born with this gigantic chasm of eternity right in the core of who we are so that nothing we get will satisfy. There are simple ways to prove that. Do you remember the first \$10 you got? How much was \$10 the first time you got \$10? And now it's just \$10. That's a Chik-Fil-A sandwich. Before it was this huge "I will rule the world," and now it's a sandwich. On top of there being this huge hole in us that the Bible just calls "eternity," the Bible also says that we're born in iniquity, that we're born sinful. So now not only do we have this gigantic, gaping wound in us that nothing will be able to heal, but now we're sinful, wicked and evil. Talk about a dark Christmas. So here we are, broken and bent.

So because of that hole in us and because of our iniquity, we frantically busy our lives to try to silence it. Why do we hate silence? Why is it we hate it so much? I think this iPod revolution is amazing. It's like we can't even walk down the sidewalk in silence anymore. We've got to busy ourselves so we don't have to think about the reality of this chasm and the sin inside of us eating away at us. So we'll busy our lives with noise, with work, with a thousand different vain pursuits, all of which don't satisfy longer than an afternoon, only to have ourselves pursuing ghosts. So we're tired, and not just because it's Christmas and you've got guests in your house. You're tired, and not just because you traveled and had to hit the mall. You're tired, and not just over the pace of the season. Just deep down, you're tired of life. I'm not saying your suicidal; I'm just saying that you get to those places where we're laying in bed, everyone else is asleep and we just don't know that we like it all and we just don't know if we get it all, even though we've got no reason to feel that way.

So here we are in the darkness of eternity being weighted down by the guilt of our iniquity, frantically trying to become good people and do good things and busy ourselves with life so that we might somehow, and we're failing miserably. Now the irony of the whole thing is that, for all of our noise, for all of the busy chaos that is our existence, the solution to both eternity and iniquity happened on this really, really quiet night. Not the hum of the speakers, just the silence of this dark night. So Christ is born, "the light of the world" the Bible says, here to solve eternity and iniquity. I love the fact that the shepherds were the first to hear. I think somewhere along the way the gospel got perverted. Here's what I mean by that. I think the gospel has become this neat little club for good people. Just look around right now. Everybody's good. Nobody's drunk,

nobody's a hooker. If we just look around, church is this beautiful gathering of middle class white folk, isn't it? I'm not dogging middle class white folk, I'm one of them. But God goes to the shepherds first. Shepherds are a step above slaves. Nobody's inviting the shepherds over for dinner. They are vulgar, dirty men. And God in heaven goes, "Hmm, tell the vulgar ones first." And so the angels show up and freak those guys out. In the darkness of the middle of the night, they're sitting around a campfire when all of a sudden the sky blows up with a thousand angelic beings. The first of which goes, "Don't be scared." As if that's going to bring any kind of calmness to the situation. And they're the first to find out.

And then God makes this crazy pattern with the life of Christ of loving unlovable. He loved the thieves. That's so strange. He just didn't celebrate with the good people; He wanted Zacchaeus to get out of the tree. Why? Because He wanted to eat dinner at his house. A prostitute walks in and weeps on His feet, and the entire community, both the Pharisees and His disciples go, "Oh if He only knew what this woman was like He would never let her do that." Jesus goes, "I know what this woman is about. She's done something very beautiful here." Somehow we've gotten from that to celebrating our moral astuteness. It robs from the beauty of the gospel when people won't admit that they're stuck. It robs from the beauty of the birth and gospel of Christ if no one in this room is wrestling tonight with dark things. You see, for all the noise, it was a really quiet night that brought healing to the world.

I don't know a lot of you. That's the thing about Christmas services. We always gather up as a staff and go, "Did you see anyone you know?" It's just this really weird kind of mix, and I don't know what you're doing in here tonight. I don't know if you're here because your parents made you, and I don't know if you're here because your kid made you. I don't know if you're here tonight because somewhere along the way you have been touched by the Spirit of God or if you're in here because what we do on Christmas Eve is go to church somewhere. I'm in here tonight to celebrate the fact that Christ came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the worst. I'm in here tonight because I come from my father's father and his father's father. They weren't just good men, and they gave me and my daddy some baggage. My dad and I have been talking lately, and all that's going to die with us. Do you know why a hundred years of wicked things is going to die with us? I can assure you it's not because we're the most disciplined of men. My staff would be the ones you hear giggling. I can assure you it won't happen because of this cataclysmic battle of the will. It will happen because in this very quiet, uneventful, silent night, Jesus was born, and the problem of eternity and the problem of iniquity began the process of dying on that night.

So Jesus comes into the world, one single light in what the Bible calls darkness. Just one single light, that's it, just one burning bright. And that one light becomes twelve. And the story of those first twelve is this really cool gathering of men, of whom you would never call the most intellectual or brilliant. In fact, the reason I love Peter so much is in one sentence where he is both blessed and then called the devil. Now I don't know how you pull that one off, but Peter pulls it off. "Blessed are you, Peter, among men. For God has shown this to you. . . you devil." Peter has this great story. He's a loud-

mouthed, arrogant, obnoxious, violent jerk who was radically changed by the gospel. And then there was John. He was the one Jesus loved, such a sweet spirit. Andrew just tended to bring everybody anew to Christ. And these twelve men, their stories grew and they became a hundred men, two hundred men and women. And then that two or three hundred men and women became five or six hundred. And then Pentecost happened and the whole thing just blew up, and all of a sudden you've got thousands. And that freaked people in the ancient world out. So they dragged one guy outside of town named Stephen and they killed him. They just beat him to death with rocks. So the church, all these little lights that were burning in Jerusalem, they fled. And it was really a beautiful thing that they fled because they carried this little light with them, this light of the truth of Christ that eternity and iniquity could finally be healed in us. And so Stephen was killed to put an end to a movement, and instead it was like this beautiful wind that took it even farther. And thousands became hundreds of thousands. And as it grew and grew, it freaked Rome out, so Rome decided, "Hey, let's not fight this thing. Let's just say we're all Christians." So they made it the law of Rome. If you remember your history, Rome became a Christian nation. But you can't impose Christianity on a group of people. You can't go, "Your heart is changed. . . because I said so." So the Dark Ages came and Germanic tribes overthrew Rome and the light continued to grow. It wasn't stopped even by a world thrown into madness. Imagine waking up tomorrow and there being no police force, no military, no 911, imagine chaos. That's what happened, and yet the light just kept on growing. And then hundreds of thousands became the first million.

And now, in China, in Africa, in Iraq and Iran, in Afghanistan and even in Louisiana, the chasm of eternity has been filled by the bright light of Christ and the guilt of iniquity has been healed by the righteousness of Christ. Every one of these candles represents somebody's story that started on this silent night, this night where everything changed. There are controversial historical figures. Thomas Jefferson is one of them. Some people say he was a brilliant man; some people say he had a few moral issues. I think you can live your whole life and not figure out what you believe about Thomas Jefferson, but you've got to do something about Christ. Jesus who steps into time and cracks it in half, Jesus who has been the subject of more literature than human being that's ever walked the earth, Jesus who has been on the cover of more magazines than any other man who's lived, Jesus whose hand extends so deeply into every facet of existence, what is it about this man that He saturates the whole world? So we celebrate Him tonight. Why? Because He came into the world to save sinners, not people who are good. He came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the worst. Can we celebrate that tonight? Can we celebrate the fact that through the quiet birth of this little baby, the hope of all that I hate about my heart can be healed and all that I love can be eternal? Can we celebrate the fact that I am not bound to history? Can we celebrate that sin will not be the master of us. Tonight you're in here and you love God or you're in here and you don't know or you're in here and all you've got is hope. Can we celebrate the birth that provided all of that?

I take very seriously Acts 17 that says the times and places in which men would dwell were set by God before the foundation of the earth was laid. So I take that as, for whatever reason, God has put us here in Dallas, Texas, for this time, in this place. And

for whatever reason, God has woven our lives together for His purpose and His calling. And there is no other place in the world I'd rather be than with you, fighting this fight along with you, holding hands and hoping with you, crying with you and rejoicing with you. I love you.

Let me pray for us tonight. "Father I thank You for these men and women. And I don't know what the rest of their night looks like, but I pray that in the madness of Christmas in America, You might quiet our souls tonight. I thank You that, because of the birth of Christ, we've had both eternity and iniquity solved, and solved so richly. I pray that we might rest in the hope that our hearts can be changed, not just that our behavior can be managed. I pray tonight that, in homes all across this area, we might just talk about You. I pray for those in here tonight who don't just understand this thing. God, I pray that You would let them hear tonight. I just pray that You wouldn't let this Christmas be routine for us. Would You make it thick and beautiful with Your presence? It's for Your great name that I ask all of this. Amen. Merry Christmas."