

# **Messiah in a Manger**

Reflections on  
the Birth of Jesus

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# THE WORD BECAME FLESH

*In the beginning was the Word  
(John 1:1).*

Where do you begin in writing about Jesus? Do you start with his preaching ministry? He came on the scene with a rag tag group of followers and began to say things in such a way that it was full of newness and clarity so that people are still quoting him two thousand years later. Do you begin with the humble origins of his birth and the strange contrast of circumstances surrounding him; angelic appearances and traveling wise men from afar? Or do you go back even earlier to the cryptic promises made in the Hebrew Scriptures that foretold the coming of a long-awaited Messiah?

The writer of the Gospel of John must have faced the same question, for he begins his account with the words, “In the beginning...” It was a familiar phrase, for it was with these words that the Hebrew Scriptures begin:

*In the beginning God created the  
heavens and the earth (Genesis 1:1).*

By starting with those particular words, the author takes us back to the very creation of the heavens and the earth and all that they contain. But he quickly departs from that account as he

goes on to tell us, not what God did, but what God was.

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God (John 1:1).*

What's in a word? We start using words as we make the transition from baby to toddler, from baby sounds to vocalizing sounds that have specific meaning. We soon learn that words have content and communicate ideas. After a while, those words come more naturally and seem to take on a life of their own.

Something similar happens in the opening pages of the Bible. We haven't gotten very far into the story of creation before God speaks and then things start happening. He says, "Let there be light," and then light is there. He says, "Let all the water go to one place and let dry land appear in another," and it happened. God says the words and they become reality.

The Jewish readers would have known this. It was a familiar story to them and they would have immediately made the connection. But the writer's audience is wider than the Jewish people and his description of the Word had a slightly different connotation to the non-Jewish part of his audience. While they might not have known the Hebrew Scriptures, they were likely to be familiar with an ancient Greek philosopher Plato and Aristotle who described the word, the Greek term is *logos*, to describe rational thought, whether

spoken or unspoken.

In the beginning was the Word. If you were a Jewish reader, you thought in terms of how God had spoken the world into existence and filled it with life and knowledge. If you were a Greek reader familiar with the philosophical ideas of the day, you thought of how there is a certain orderliness to the cosmos that speaks of an intelligent designer, someone or something that is far bigger and older than we are. That someone is God.

God did not come into existence in the beginning. He was already there and he was already with the Word and he already was the Word. Modern science speaks of the origins of the universe in terms of a “big bang,” but God preceded any of that.

But there came a time when the God who made time and space entered his creation to communicate himself to us. Using the same analogy of the Word, the Bible says it this way:

*And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth (John 1:14).*

The Christmas story is about that time when the same one who was in the beginning and who was with God and who was God; that same one became flesh. He became as we are. Skin. Bones. Teeth, hair, and eyeballs. Flesh and blood

and everything that goes with it.

God came near. He always had been, but it had never been so apparent and so experienced by mankind as when he took on flesh to become one of us. He lived with us, walking our dirty streets and smelling our distinctive odors and participating in our commonplace conversations. He experienced all of life, both the mundane and the monotonous as well as the pleasant and the profound.

God came near and that means he connected personally. There is nothing so personal as a baby. When you hold a baby, you get to see helplessness in your hands. Babies cannot fend for themselves. They are a picture of dependence. They need someone else to feed them, to change them, and to love them. God had never been dependant upon anyone or anything, but the one who was God became a baby who experienced that complete and total dependence.

During the days of his earthly ministry, when Jesus wanted to show his disciples an object lesson of what kind of person entered into the kingdom of God, he used a baby. It isn't that we have to don diapers or gurgle and coo, but it is that same quality of dependence that we are called to embrace. Another way of describing it is faith. Dependence and faith are synonyms; they are two words that mean the same thing. That means the very thing that God calls us to do is something he experienced in the person of Jesus.

Notice the reason why he came. The author says that "we beheld His glory." It was so that we



might see the glory of God. That has been mankind's great ambition throughout the ages. Moses asked if he might be permitted to be shown God's glory and he was permitted to see only a brief afterglow. God is invisible, but in the person of Jesus, mankind was allowed to see God in a visible form.

Throughout this book, we are going to look at that story. We will see Him through the eyes of those who encountered Him. In doing so, I hope that you come to see Him in a way that you never have before.

## ZACHARIAS' STORY

Birth announcements are happy times, except when they catch you by surprise. There are times when learning of a pregnancy brings initial surprise and even shock, even if it is something that is desired. That was the case in the story of Zacharias.

*In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a certain priest named Zacharias, of the division of Abijah; and he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. And they were both righteous in the sight of God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord. And they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both advanced in years. (Luke 1:5-7).*

Zacharias was in the family business. He was a priest and his father had been a priest before him, as had been all of his ancestors since the days of King David, a thousand years earlier. That priesthood had been organized into twenty four courses of priests, each of which would take their turn serving in the temple throughout the year.

Not only had Zacharias taken up the family business, but he had also married into the family

business. His wife was also from the same priestly clan and the two of them were known for their exemplary lifestyle. There was only one problem; they had no child. To make matters worse, they had no prospects of having a child. Elizabeth was barren and she had been barren for a very long time. They were both advanced in years and the time had come where, even if she had not been barren, childbearing was no longer possible.

In these days of birth control and abortion, it may be difficult to identify with their problem. The Jews thought of barrenness as a sign of God's disfavor. Fertility was one of the blessings that God had promised as a result of obedience:

*You shall be blessed above all peoples; there shall be no male or female barren among you or your cattle.  
(Deuteronomy 7:14).*

Zacharias and Elizabeth appeared to be in a hopeless situation. God often places us into a hopeless situation so that we will turn to Him. Faith is dependence on God and that God-dependence only begins when self-dependence ends. Zacharias and Elizabeth were to learn this in a very striking way.

*Now it came about, while he was performing his priestly service before God in the appointed order of his division, 9 according to the custom of*

*the priestly office, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And the whole multitude of the people were in prayer outside at the hour of the incense offering. (Luke 1:8-10).*

As I mentioned earlier, the entire priesthood was divided into twenty-four courses. There were about a thousand priests in each course and the entire group was rotated in to take their turn for a week of service every six months. When their week was over, another course would come in for its week of ministrations. It was during Zacharias's week of ministrations that our story begins.

Each morning during this week, lots were drawn to determine which priest would be permitted to enter into the temple and burn the incense. According to the Talmud, a priest could only be chosen for this honor once during his lifetime. Therefore, this event was considered to be the greatest moment in the life of any priest. On this particular day, the lot fell to Zacharias. It might have been the first time he had ever received this honor in his very long life of service in the Temple.

Try to visualize the scene. It is the time of the morning sacrifice. The sun is just beginning to rise in the east, casting golden rays from behind the Mount of Olive. In the early morning light, the priests of the division of Abijah have assembled within the temple area. The lots are

drawn and the lot falls to Zacharias.

Once the morning sacrifice has been offered and its blood dipped on the horns of the great altar outside the temple, Zacharias climbs the steps leading up to the temple porch and passes through the great gold-leaved doors into the Holy Place. With Zacharias are two other priests who have been chosen to assist him in this service. The first priest removes the old coals that have been left from the previous evening's service. He then retires from the temple. The second priest now advances and spreads the live coals across the altar and then he also retires.

Now Zacharias stands alone in the temple. A thousand priests stand outside, and thousands of worshipers have gathered beyond in the Court of Israel. But in here it is quiet. To his left is the golden lampstand, bathing the interior of the temple in the soft glow of its burnign lamps. To his right is the table of shewbread. Before him hangs a great woven veil which serves as the doorway to the Holy of Holies. In front of the veil stands the altar of incense. It is made of wood and completely overlaid with pure gold. Its hot coals glow dimly in the faint light of the temple. Zacharias steps up to the altar and begins to spread the incense over the altar. Suddenly he is interrupted.

*And an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the altar of incense. And Zacharias was troubled when he saw him, and fear gripped him.*

*(Luke 1:11-12).*

This part of the story sounds a bit strange to our modern sensibilities. After all, angels don't really appear before people today, do they? But that is the point of the story. They didn't regularly appear to people back then, either. There were images of angels sewn onto the veil that hung in the Temple, but never had an angel actually appeared here except perhaps in a prophet's vision.

*The angel said to him, "Do not be afraid"* (1:13). It would have been a shock to Zacharias to see anyone with him in the Temple, but the sight of an angel must have been especially terrifying. Words of comfort are given and they are followed by words of hope.

*"Your petition has been heard."* To what petition does this refer? Apparently, Zacharias and Elizabeth had been praying for a child. It is possible that they had been praying this way for forty years or more. In all those years they had not had a child. Now it is humanly impossible. They are too old. Nothing short of a miracle will allow them to have a child.

This is the way God often works. He answers prayers according to His timing. Sometimes He waits until it is humanly impossible and then He steps in. He did not give Abraham a son until he was too old to have one. He did not give prosperity to Jacob until he had made him a fugitive in a strange land. He did not make Joseph ruler over Egypt until he had placed him

into slavery and into prison. He did not allow Moses to lead Israel until he had allowed the Israelites to reject him. He did not give Gideon the victory until He had first taken Gideon's army and reduced it to a small force of 300 men. He did not make David king until He had first made David an outlaw without a country. He did not make the disciples leaders of His church until He had first scattered them and brought them to the point where they denied His name.

Why does God work this way? Why does He wait until the situation is humanly impossible? I think that it is so we will be forced to give Him the glory.

*“And you will give him the name John” (1:13).* The name “John” is the English rendition of the Hebrew name *Yhohanan*. It means “gift of Yahweh.” It was a common name among the Jews of this period and it is still a fairly common name today. However, I think that this is a name with meaning. It is a name that describes what God is doing in the lives of Zacharias and Elizabeth. But it is also a name that signifies the fulfillment of a promise that God had made hundreds of years earlier.

*“And it is he who will go as a forerunner before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers back to the children, and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous; so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” (Luke 1:17).*

Hundreds of years earlier, the Hebrew Scriptures had promised that Elijah would be sent as a forerunner of the Lord. Elijah was always considered to be one of the greatest prophets of the Old Testament. He was the world's best weather forecaster. He predicted that it would not rain for three years and it did not rain. He stood before the king of Israel and condemned him. He prayed and a dead boy came to life. He challenged the religious apostasy of the entire nation of Israel at Mount Carmel. He did not die; instead he was taken up alive into heaven. Four hundred years after Elijah was removed from the scene, a prophecy was made concerning him.

*Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord. And he will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the land with a curse. (Malachi 4:5-6).*

Malachi had been the last of the Old Testament prophets. This was the last of his prophecies. After this prophecy, there had been silence. But now, a son is going to be born to Zacharias who will go before God in the spirit and power of Elijah. The message that he will preach will be similar to that which Elijah preached. It will be a message of repentance. He is going to be



a forerunner to the Lord.

Zacharias would have known all of this. But he also knew his situation. He knew that he was an old man and that his wife was an old woman and that, even if she had not been barren, there are certain things and don't happen between a husband and a wife when you get that old.

*And Zacharias said to the angel,  
“How shall I know this for certain? For  
I am an old man, and my wife is  
advanced in years.” (Luke 1:16).*

The reaction of Zacharias can be summed up in one word, unbelief. Here is a man who has been praying for a child. An angel appears to him inside the temple and tells him that his prayer has been answered. What is his reaction? “How do I know that you are telling the truth?”

The problem with Zacharias is that he had a very limited view of God. He did not really believe that God had the power to give him a son. We often have the same problem. It is reflected in our prayer life. Do we pray like we really believe that we were speaking to the God of the Universe? There is a direct correlation between the reality of our faith and the perseverance of our prayers. If we believed better, we would pray more.

*And the angel answered and said to him, “I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God; and I have been sent to speak to you, and to bring you this good*

*news. And behold, you shall be silent and unable to speak until the day when these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which shall be fulfilled in their proper time.” (Luke 1:19-20).*

Because Zacharias had spoken in unbelief by asking for a sign, he would now be silenced until this prophecy had been completely fulfilled. He had asked for a sign. He would now receive a sign. He had questioned the power of God, voicing his unbelief; now he would not be saying anything.

*The people were waiting for Zacharias, and were wondering at his delay in the temple (1:21).* All this time, the 1000 priests and the multitude of morning worshipers have been gathered outside the temple. It is the time of the morning prayers. As the incense burns and fills the temple, seeping out and drifting into the sky, so their prayers will be ascending to heaven. But there has been a delay. Zacharias has gone into the temple. His two assistants have long since come out. The period of waiting lengthens. This was highly unusual. The Talmud taught that it was customary for a priest who has offered incense to leave the altar as quickly as possible, lest he unwittingly commit some act of sin in the presence of God.

A soft murmur begins to run through the crowd outside the temple. What has happened? Why does he linger? Something must be wrong. Maybe God has struck him down the way the sons

of Aaron and the sons of Eli were struck down. Finally, they see a movement at the door of the temple. It is Zacharias. Everyone breaths a sigh of relief.

Zacharias emerges from the temple. The priests stand beneath him at the bottom of the steps, waiting for him to give the benediction. He opens his mouth to speak and his lips move, but no words come out. He tries again, but there is only silence. As he realizes that he has made no sound, he begins to move his arms in wild gestures. Gradually, the people begin to realize that something fantastic has happened in the temple.

Zacharias had to finish the remaining week of his priestly duties in silence. This was a constant reminder of the faithfulness of God. When his days of duty were over, he went home and listened to Elizabeth. We will see what she had to say in our later chapters. But first, I want you to imagine what it might be like to be silent before the Lord. Not to come with a request or a complaint or even a praise, but simply to be silent in His presence. Perhaps there is a time and a place for such silence. Maybe if we took some time from our hurried schedules to be quiet with the Lord, we might find that God is there in the quiet.

## MARY'S STORY

It seems fitting that the first announcement of the coming of Messiah should have been made in the temple. It was there that the sacrifices were made, their blood running red in the temple basins. It was there that the morning and evening offerings were made, along with prayers for the redemption of Jerusalem. It was there that the high priest would go in once a year to atone for the sins of the people. And yet, when the time comes for the announcement to be made to that one who shall bear the Divine Son, it is not to Jerusalem that we look, but to Galilee. There was a saying among the Jews that if you wanted to become spiritual, you went to Jerusalem; but if you wanted to become rich, go to Galilee.

It was a rich, fertile land with rolling hills and sun splashed meadows; a land of sparkling streams and peaceful villages. It was truly a land flowing with milk and honey. But more than that, it was in the days of Jesus a land of wealthy industry. The main roads of the Middle East ran through the hills of Galilee and a hundred cities and towns grew rich by trading with the merchants who traveled along these roads.

Traveling north from Jerusalem, you follow a high ridge of mountains which winds its way northward through the land of the Samaritans. Finally, you come to the wide plain of Jezreel. On the southern edge of the plain lies the ancient city

of Megiddo, a city that was already old in Solomon's day. This is the Valley of Jezreel, the battlefield of the ancient world and known popularly today as Armageddon. It was here that Deborah and Barak defeated the Canaanites. This was the place where Gideon's 300 had vanquished the Midianites. The chariots of Thutmose and Amenhotep of Egypt fought the Canaanites here. It was here that Saul had been slain and it was here that the kings Ahaziah and Josiah of Judah each met their deaths.

As you look across this lush, fertile valley, you would be hard-pressed to visualize all of the bloodshed that has taken place here. No longer can you hear the tramp of soldier's boots. Instead there is the singing of birds, the grazing of sheep, and the clank of a carpenter's simple tools.

Far to the north, you can barely make out the snow-tipped peak of Mount Hermon. To the west, the plain is dotted with cities and villages, beyond which rises the purple slopes of Mount Carmel, and beyond that the sea. To the east rises Mount Tabor, around which curves the bustling highway. Nestled in the low hills to the north of the plain is a tiny village. Nazareth. From this village will come the one who will give birth to the Savior of the world.

Nazareth's claim to fame was the fact that it was one of the cities of gathering for the priests. In our last chapter, we stated that each of the twenty-four courses of priests would gather at a city prior to their week of service in the temple. Those who were able to would travel to

Jerusalem. Those who could not would remain in the city for a week of prayer. Nazareth was one of those gathering-places.

*Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city in Galilee, called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the descendants of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. (Luke 1:26-27).*

This reference to the sixth month speaks of the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy. She had kept herself in seclusion for the first five months. Now she has revealed herself and her condition to everyone. There is no doubt in anyone's mind that that one who was once barren is now with child. It is only after this that Gabriel comes to Mary.

Mary was engaged, but that meant more back then than it does today. Within the context of a Jewish culture, an engagement was a legally binding promise of marriage. The only way to be released from this sort of engagement was to go through divorce proceedings.

*And coming in, he said to her, "Hail, favored one! The Lord is with you."*

*But she was greatly troubled at this statement, and kept pondering what kind of salutation this might be. And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid,*

*Mary; for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb, and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever; and His kingdom will have no end. (Luke 1:28-33).*

Mary's first reaction was one of fear and wonderment. This is not surprising. She had never seen an angel before. Up to this point, she had been a very normal person living a very normal life in a very normal town. As we said in the last chapter, angelic appearances were not the norm. However, I don't think that it was the angel's appearance which troubled Mary as much as what the angel said to her. Mary is told that she has been picked out by God for some special purpose. She is going to have a child and she quickly gets the impression that it is going to take place before her marriage with her intended husband has been consummated.

Mary reacts to the angel's announcement with a question. "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" She is not doubting the truthfulness of this prophecy. She is merely asking how it will be accomplished in light of the fact that she has never joined in sexual contact with a man. The reply is even more startling:

*And the angel answered and said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for this reason the holy offspring shall be called the Son of God. And behold, even your relative Elizabeth has also conceived a son in her old age; and she who was called barren is now in her sixth month. For nothing will be impossible with God." (Luke 1:35-37).*

This is going to be the work of God. He is going to supercede the laws of nature in order to produce a child in the womb of Mary. Just as the Spirit of God hovered over the earth at the creation and brought forth new life, so the Holy Spirit will bring about a physical life within the womb of Mary. This came as a complete surprise to Mary. There was absolutely nothing in Jewish theology to make one think that the Messiah would ever be born of a virgin. In his classic book on *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, Gresham Machen points out:

*There is not the slightest direct evidence... in support of the view that there was in the pre-Christian Judaism of the time subsequent to the Old Testament any expectation of a virgin birth of the Messiah (Pg 297).*

Mary is going to become pregnant. She will



have a child. But she will have a child without the benefit of a husband. What is wrong with that? These days it happens so often that one would hardly notice such a thing.

Mary is engaged. She has entered into a legal contract with Joseph to become his wife at the end of this betrothal period. The Law is very explicit as to what is to be done in the event that she is found to be unfaithful. The penalty is death by stoning.

Mary is going to become pregnant. It will look as though she has been unfaithful. Nobody is expecting a virgin birth and nobody is going to believe that she is still a virgin. In spite of all this, Mary still submits herself to the will of the Lord.

*And Mary said, "Behold, the bondslave of the Lord; be it done to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her." (Luke 1:38).*

Mary's attitude is an appropriate one, for the ministry of Jesus will be one of submission. He came, not to do His own will, but to accomplish the will of His Father. That will was to accomplish our salvation, to die on our cross in order that we might be united to God. Coming to Christ and becoming a Christian means echoing the words of Mary as we trust in the One to whom she gave birth: "Behold the bondslave of the Lord; be it done to me according to your word."

## ELIZABETH'S STORY

*Now at this time Mary arose and went with hast to the hill country, to a city of Judah, And entered the house of Zacharias and greeted Elizabeth. And it came about that when Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. (Luke 1:39-41).*

Why did Mary leave Nazareth and go to visit Elizabeth? Undoubtedly, it was to see for herself the sign of Elizabeth's pregnancy and to share her own good fortune with her relative. After all, no one would be able to identify with her situation as much as Elizabeth would.

Elizabeth was at least in her sixth month by now. By this time, it would have been normal to have the fetus moving within her womb. However, Elizabeth is going to interpret this movement as something quite out of the ordinary.

*And she cried out with a loud voice, and said, "Blessed among women are you, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And how has it happened to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby leaped in my womb for joy. And blessed*

*is she who believed that there would be  
a fulfillment of what had been spoken to  
her by the Lord.” (Luke 1:42-45).*

Elizabeth breaks forth in praise to the Lord.  
In the way of Hebrew poetry, this praise contains  
a threefold parallelism.

*Blessed among women are you  
Blessed is the fruit of your womb!  
Blessed is she who believed.*

Elizabeth looks at Mary and she sees more  
than just a young girl. She sees the one who will  
give birth to the Messiah, the One who is her  
Lord. This is reminiscent of David when he spoke  
of One who was his Lord.

*Yahweh says to my Lord:  
“Sit at My right hand,  
Until I make Your enemies a footstool  
for Your feet.” (Psalm 110:1).*

Elizabeth seem to realize that the One to  
whom Mary will give birth is the same One of  
whom David spoke. David speaks of One who  
was his lord, but kings don't have lords. There is  
the king and then there is God. But David speaks  
of how God speaks to his Lord. This strange and  
cryptic passage would introduce a mystery, for the  
Jewish people came to understand that this Lord  
of whom David spoke was the Messiah, his  
descendant. It is here that the mystery deepens,

for in ancient cultures, it is the father and not the son who is lord. Yet David described the One who would be his descendant as his lord.

The answer to the mystery is understood in the identity of Jesus. He was the son of Mary, but He was more than that. He was the descendant of David, but He was also more than that. Elizabeth describes Him, still in the womb as He was, as her Lord. She uses the same title for Jesus that David used of the Messiah. He is the One who was Elizabeth's Lord and David's Lord. Although He was born in time and history, He had a pre-existence that transcended both time and history. He is the One who could say, "Before Abraham was, I am."

*Now the time had come for Elizabeth to give birth, and she brought forth a son. And her neighbors and her relatives heard that the Lord had displayed His great mercy toward her; and they were rejoicing with her. (Luke 1:57-58).*

Our story now jumps forward several months. Mary has returned to Nazareth, and Elizabeth's pregnancy has come full term. Her baby is born and, true to the promise in the Temple, it is a son. I am sure that Elizabeth had told her neighbors and friends the significance of her pregnancy. The result was that they glorified God at the birth of this baby. Everyone is talking about it; everyone except the father. Zacharias has been silent for

the past nine months. Even when the baby is born, he remains unable to speak.

*And it came about that on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to call him Zacharias, after his father. (Luke 1:59).*

Imagine the scene. Early on the morning of the eighth day following the child's birth, the family and friends of Zacharias and Elizabeth gather together at their home. Elizabeth greets each guest as they enter into the house. Zacharias smiles his greeting. When all of the guests have arrived, Elizabeth takes her infant son and hands him to the priest. The priest takes this infant son of Abraham and speaks a benediction over the child. Then, he takes a knife and carefully cuts around the foreskin of the infant, marking this child as a son of Israel, the sign of the Abrahamic Covenant now on his own little body.

The child has not been named. Since God had changed the names of Abraham and Sarah at the time that He gave them the Covenant of Circumcision, so the Jews would name a male child only after he had been circumcised. This rite of circumcision completed, the priest would now offer up a prayer:

“Our God, and the God of our fathers - raise up this child to his father and mother, and let his name be called in Israel Zacharias, the son of Zacharias.”

Suddenly there is an interruption. It comes from Elizabeth. All turn in wonder and astonishment at the outburst of this aged mother.

“What did she say?”

“Did I hear her correctly?”

*“He shall be called John”*

What’s in a name? In my own American culture, the meaning of names are normally ignored. People are generally more concerned with how a name sounds and that it have no negative associations. For example, I don’t know of too many parents who have named their child “Benedict Arnold” or “Judas Iscariot.” But names in the Hebrew culture were often very meaningful. Abram and Sarai both had their names changed to reflect their abandoning of their old pagan worship as they began to worship the Lord.

It was customary in that day to name a child after someone in the family. Thus, the people had assumed that this child would be given the name Zacharias Jr. But Elizabeth announces that they are going to break with that tradition. The child shall be named “John.” The name “John” is a Hebrew name (*Yhohanani*) meaning “gift of Yahweh.” This is going to be a very meaningful name. It will be this same John who will go out to proclaim the coming of the One who will be God’s gift to the world.

Zacharias had not uttered a word since that day nine months ago in the temple. As is often the case, the people had assumed that because he could not speak, he was also unable to hear. Thus, they try to communicate to him through the

means of sign language. He signaled for writing materials to be brought and the written result was shown to all: “*His name is John*” (1:63).

There is a silence and then, to everyone’s surprise, the silence is broken by Zacharias who has not spoken in nine months. As he spoke now, it was out of a heart of praise to God.

*And fear came on all those living around them; and all these matters were being talked about in all the hill country of Judea. And all who heard them kept them in mind, saying, “What then will this child turn out to be? For the hand of the Lord was certainly with him.” (Luke 1:65-66).*

This “gospel by gossip” was spontaneous. It did not take place as a result of an evangelistic program. No one delivered a message on how true Christians ought to be sharing their faith. There was no manipulation or coercion. It was a natural outgrowth of people being excited about something they had witnessed. That is the key to real kingdom growth. It isn’t found in a plan or a program, but in believers becoming excited about the Lord who has saved them.

Have you come to that point of understanding and receiving God’s good news on your behalf? If you have, the natural result will be that you will want to share it with someone else.

## JOSEPH'S STORY

*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. (Matthew 1:18).*

We saw in the last chapter that Mary and Joseph had been engaged. Matthew's account given here says that they were betrothed. The Jews referred to this as the *Tena'im*, the "Conditions." On a certain day, Joseph and Mary would have gathered in the presence of family and friends. In the presence of witnesses, Joseph would give a ring to Mary along with a written document in which he promised himself in marriage. Vows would be exchanged, sealing their betrothal. They were now considered legally married. However, the marriage would not be consummated for a year. Joseph would return to his home and Mary would continue to live in the home of her parents. And yet, this was more than a mere engagement. The only way that a betrothal could be nullified would be through either death or divorce. The legal penalty for unfaithfulness would be the same as the penalty for adultery, death by stoning. In the event that this penalty was carried out, all of the woman's possessions would go to the husband. This stopped being merely theoretical when Mary was discovered to



be with child.

*...before they came together she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit. (Matthew 1:18).*

Many years ago, my wife, Paula, was teaching a Sunday School class of high school girls and they came to the subject of Mary and the birth of Christ. Paula had one of those young girls wear a maternity dress to church that Sunday with a pillow secured underneath to show a bulging tummy. You can imagine the looks and double-takes when she walked into the class. Similarly, you can imagine the small-town reaction as news of Mary's pregnancy began to be rumored about. It is not long before the news come to Joseph. He knows that he is not the father. This can only mean one thing to him. His beloved has been unfaithful to him!

There is no indication that Joseph realized that Mary's pregnancy was due to the Holy Spirit. We know that it was from our perspective. We can read it right here in Matthew's account. But Joseph did not know that. The Gospel of Matthew had not yet been written. Joseph was confronted by a decision. What to do?

*And Joseph her husband, being a righteous man, and not wanting to disgrace her, desired to put her away secretly. (Matthew 1:19).*

Joseph had a decision to make. There was one of three things that Joseph could have done in this situation. First, he could denounce Mary publicly and have her stoned to death in agreement with the Law of Moses. In such a case, any dowry or possessions of her would automatically revert to him. But Joseph did not want to do this. He had been hurt, but he was not out for revenge and he did not want to disgrace her in this way. Secondly, he could divorce her privately. Remember, they were legally bound through the betrothal and that bond could only be broken through death or divorce. Because of what he considered to be unfaithfulness, he could divorce her privately in her parents' house and save her from the humiliation of condemnation and death. Indeed, it seems from the text that this is exactly what he had determined to do. What he apparently did not even consider was the third option. He could marry her and adopt her Child as his own. This was out of the realm of the ordinary, for few men in that day would overlook what appeared to be such unfaithfulness on the part of a bride.

He made his decision. He resolved to divorce her privately. He would do it in secret. He would write out a bill of divorcement and he would deliver it in private to her home. But the Lord had other ideas. In doing so, he would protect this girl whom he thought had been unfaithful to him.

*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 that which has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. And she will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for it is He who will save His people from their sins."*

*Now all this took place that what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet might be fulfilled, saying, "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 arose from his sleep, and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took her as his wife, and kept her a virgin until she gave birth to a Son; and he called His name Jesus. (Matthew 1:20-25).*

That is the story. A virgin became pregnant. Heaven leaned down and placed its most precious treasure within the womb of a young Jewish girl. The Creator took the form of the creature. God became a fetus. The Divine in diapers.

Joseph is a role-model for step-fathers. Our society doesn't have many kind things to say about step-fathers. But Joseph was a godly step-father. He adopted a child that was not her own, raised Him as his own and even taught Him his own trade.

What I want to do is to explore the implications of the virgin birth. What does it

mean to us today that Jesus was born of a virgin?

First, the virgin birth means that God became specific. We knew that God was concerned with man in general. After all, God is love and He is the giver of life. It is easy to believe that God loves and even that He loves people. But to say that He loves me — that is something else.

God could have written about His love in the sky. He could have printed the words, “I love you” in the clouds where all could read. He could have had the stars line up to broadcast that message. That would have communicated His message. But it would not have done so with the personableness that He did in the incarnation.

How specific did God get? One teenage girl and her carpenter fiancé. Two ordinary people — or so it seemed. This brings us to our second point.

The virgin birth means that Jesus has both the legal and the moral right to the throne of David. Notice how Joseph is addressed by the Angel of the Lord. He is called, “Son of David.” If we had read the first 17 verses of this chapter, we would have seen the genealogy of Joseph. It was a very distinguished genealogy. There are some exalted names here.

Abraham.

Jacob.

Judah.

David.

Solomon.

It was a kingly line. And Joseph was a descendant of King David. He was royalty. Of

course, this line was no longer in power. An Idumean by the name of Herod the Great was on the throne. He is a puppet of the Roman government. But this Galilean carpenter is the true royal line of David. He is going to take Mary's son and he will adopt him as his own. Because of this, Jesus will have the legal right to the title, "King of the Jews." That is not all. There is another name in that genealogy which has a special significance. It is seen in verse 11.

*And to Josiah were born **Jeconiah** and his brothers at the time of the deportation to Babylon. (Matthew 1:11).*

Did you hear about the fellow who looked up his family tree, only to find that he was the sap? Jeconiah was the sap of his family tree. He was one of the last kings of Judah. He is known in the Bible alternately as...

Jeconiah.

Jehoiachin.

Coniah.

His was a very short reign, lasting only a few months. Even within those few months, he did so bad that the Lord pronounced a curse upon both him and his descendants.

*Is this man Coniah a despised shattered jar?  
Or is he and undesirable vessel?  
Why have he and his descendants been  
hurled out and cast into a land that they*

*had not known?  
O land, land, land,  
Hear the word of the Lord!  
Thus says the Lord,  
“Write this man down childless,  
A man who will not prosper in his days;  
For no man of his descendants will  
prosper  
Sitting on the throne of David  
Or ruling again in Judah. (Jeremiah  
22:28-30).*

Do you see what God promised? He said that none of the descendants of Jeconiah would ever prosper on the throne of David. This means that, while Joseph had the legal right to sit upon David's throne, he did not have the spiritual right to do so. But his adopted Son did. Jesus is the only One who has both the legal as well as the spiritual right to sit upon David's throne. If Jesus is not the rightful Messiah of Israel, then there is no Messiah. There is no second choice. There is no understudy waiting in the wings. There is no other name under heaven, given among men whereby you can be saved. The virgin birth means that the prophets were right.

*Now all this took place that what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet might be fulfilled, saying, <sup>23</sup> “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." (Matthew 1:22-23).*

This is a quotation from Isaiah 7:14. An examination of the context of that prophecy reveals that it seems to have been fulfilled as least initially in the days in which the prophet lived. Isaiah prophesied at a time when the Assyrian Empire was at its zenith. Their warriors had spread their reign of terror throughout most of the known world and were now threatening the lands that lay along the eastern Mediterranean. The small kingdoms along the coast were no match for the hoards from the north and they decided the only way they could resist this onslaught was to band together into a single alliance. Accordingly, Egypt, Syria and the northern kingdom of Israel formed an alliance to which they invited the southern kingdom of Judah to join. Ahaz, the king of Judah refused.

The alliance took the stance that to be separate from them was to be against them and they prepared to invade Judah and to install a puppet king of their own choosing. Suddenly Ahaz found himself surrounded by enemies on all sides. It is into this scene that Isaiah comes. He has a message. It is a message from God. The message is that the plans of this confederacy will fail.

God gives a prophecy to Ahaz. He tells Ahaz what will happen in the future. Ahaz will not be deposed. It is instead the kings who threaten him who will meet their end. Ahaz is given a sign to show the prophecy will come to pass. This sign

serves as the signature of God, assuring Ahaz that the prophecy will come to pass.

*Then the LORD spoke again to Ahaz, saying, "Ask a sign for yourself from the LORD your God; make it deep as Sheol or high as heaven." (Isaiah 7:10-11).*

God offers to let Ahaz choose what the sign will be. He can make it anything he wants. But Ahaz refuses to ask for a sign, even though God has told him to do so.

*But Ahaz said, "I will not ask, nor will I test the LORD!" (Isaiah 7:12).*

At first glance, Ahaz seems to be doing a very noble and pious thing. He gives the excuse that he does not want to test the Lord. But that is not a correct response. He is like the man who says, "I don't pray because I don't want to bother God with my petty problems." At the root of Ahaz's problem is that he is trusting in the armies of Assyria rather than trusting in the Lord.

*Then he said, "Listen now, O house of David! Is it too slight a thing for you to try the patience of men, that you will try the patience of my God as well? Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel." (Isaiah 7:13-14).*



The Lord has been addressing Himself through the prophet to Ahaz. Yet something quite remarkable takes place in these verses. He speaks to the “house of David” and He switches to the plural. Though He is speaking to Ahaz, His audience is wider than Ahaz. While this might be a plural of majesty, it might be something more. It may be a clue that we are to see the words of this prophecy as having a wider audience.

Here is the sign. A virgin will be with child. She shall have a son. He will be called Immanuel. To be fair, we must point out that the Hebrew word used here does not technically mean a “virgin.” It more specifically represents a “maiden” or a “young woman.” On the other hand, the Jewish translators of the Septuagint translated this with the Greek word *parthenos* which is the specific term for a “virgin.” That translation was made over 200 years before the birth of Christ and the translators were not trying to prove a theological point. They were simply translating the text as they understood it.

The prophecy has both an initial application that was fulfilled in the days of Ahaz as well as an ultimate application in the birth of Jesus. You look at this prophecy and it speaks of a sign that was given in the days of Ahaz that brought about his political salvation and it also speaks of that which brings about our eternal salvation.

The Bible is not a unique book because it contains prophecy. There are other religious books which contain prophecy. But the Bible is distinctly unique in that it contains specific

prophecies which were fulfilled independently of the author. Consider for a moment only those prophecies which relate to the coming of the Messiah.

- He would be a Jew from the tribe of Judah.
- He would be the Son of David.
- He would be born in Bethlehem.
- And yet He would come out of Egypt.
- And also be known as a Nazarene.
- Even the date of His coming is alluded to.
- As well as Herod's assassination attempt.

But the most unusual prophecy of all was the one that is quoted here in this chapter. He was to be born of a virgin. There were other Jews from the tribe of Judah and other descendants of David and other children who were born in Bethlehem. And perhaps even some who had come out of Egypt. And who were known as a Nazarene. There might even have been some such that were born at this time in history. It is this prophecy which makes Him distinct. Born of a virgin. Conceived by the breath of God. And even more amazing is the fact that it was foretold by the Hebrew prophet seven hundred years before the birth of Jesus.

Do you see the implication? It is that our God is a God who keeps His word. He speaks and it comes to pass. He kept His word in the days of Ahaz and He also keeps His word today. That means you can believe Him when He makes a promise to you. He has never yet broken a promise. He won't start with you. You can believe Him because the virgin birth means that God is with us.

*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." (Matthew 1:23).*

The story is told of a little boy who was out walking with his father. The father said, "Son, do you know where we are?" The son replied, "No." The father asked, "Do you know how far it is to home." And the boy admitted that he did not. "Son, do you know the direction we ought to turn if we were going home?"

"No," replied the boy. "Son, you appear to be lost," the father commented. The boy responded, "How can I be lost when you are with me?"

When the Father is with us, we may not know where we are, but we can never be lost. This is what Christmas is all about. It isn't about gifts or credit cards or wrapping paper or jolly old Santas. It is about a time when God came near. It is about a time when heaven touched earth. Because of that, earth can now know heaven.

Not everyone is all that fond of Christmas. There are a lot of people who become gloomy and depressed at that time of the year. The next time you feel that way, remember that the party is not for you. It is for Him. And yet, there is a sense in which it is also for you because it is pointing to the source of your salvation.

*And she will bear a Son; and you  
shall call His name Jesus, for it is He*

*who will save His people from their sins.*  
(Matthew 1:21).

Notice that the name “Jesus” is said to have a special significance. It is the English form of the Hebrew name *Yashua* (Joshua). It means “Yahweh saves.” This name presupposes several things.

First, it presupposes that there are sins from which we need to be saved. Not merely mistakes. Or alternative lifestyles. Or psychological aberrations. But sins. Active and outright rebellion against God. We all have sinned and we all continue to fall short of that to which we were created. We are real people who commit real sins. That is the bad news. To make it worse, our sins separate us from God. They cry out for the justice of God to judge them. He is a just judge who will not permit sin to go unpunished.

The bad news is really bad. But the good news is really good. The good new is that we have a savior. Not merely a good example. Or a teacher. Or a probation officer. But a savior.

Many years ago, back in the days when I was an officer with the fire department, a cargo ship floundered and broke up in heavy seas off the coast of Puerto Rico. The derelict hull presented a hazard to navigation, so a special team was sent out from South Florida to plant explosive aboard it and sink it. One of the lieutenants under my command was a part of that mission. They flew to San Juan and from there to the Dominican Republic where they boarded an ocean-going tug.

In spite of the heavy rolling seas, they were bone-tired and they were shown to a couple of bunks and fell fast asleep.

They were wakened the next morning by a crewman rushing into the room to dig out a life jacket, don it, and rush out again. You don't need to be an expert to know this is not a good sign. They went out on deck and found that the vessel was already listing. A quick SOS was sent out and then they were in the water as their vessel sank into the depths of the sea. They were 60 miles away from land. No lifeboats. Just a few flotation devices in rough, 12-16 foot seas.

An hour passed and then two. They saw a rescue helicopter in the distance, but it passed by and was gone. An hour later they saw another, but it also passed by. The day passed. Those in the water were seasick and exhausted. They were beginning to lose hope. The sun had passed its zenith and was lowering in the west when another helicopter was spotted. It also began to pass by. And then, the pilot happened to spot the bobbing heads out of the corner of his eye. They were rescued. They were saved.

What would you think of the rescuers if they had come over those in the water and called down, "You guys are doing okay. Just keep swimming in that direction and you will be okay." This would not be a Savior. It would merely be a guide. How about if the rescuers tossed down a book on "How To Swim"? This would have been a teacher, but not a Savior.

Perhaps one of our rescuers might have

jumped into the water, demonstrated the Australian Crawl and showed the right form? This would have been an example, but not a Savior.

Let's say that they took the victims up into the helicopter, dried them off, and flew them halfway back to land than then pushed them out, saying, "You can make it the rest of the way on your own!" This would not be a Savior, it would be a probation officer. Fortunately for them, their rescuer was not a...

Guide

Teacher

Example

Probation Officer.

They had a Savior and you have One, too. His name is Jesus. He came as a baby. But He didn't stay that way. The virgin birth took place so that God could taken on flesh and die in our place. He took on flesh so that He could take on the guilt of our sin. He made the supreme sacrifice. He paid the ultimate price.

*He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. (2 Corinthians 5:21).*

Such an act calls for a response on your part. If you have never come to Jesus Christ in faith and repentance, then I invite your response. If you are a Christian who has been caught up in the hustle and bustle that this world generates, I invite your

response. If you are plagued with guilt and weighed down in sin, I invite your response. If you are feeling lost in the crowd and as though your prayers aren't getting past the ceiling, then I invite your response. I invite you to come to Him today.

## THE EMPEROR'S STORY

*Now it came about in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth. This was the first census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all were proceeding to register for the census, everyone to his own city. (Luke 2:1-3).*

The story of the birth of Jesus does not begin with “once upon a time.” It is neither a myth nor a legend nor a fairy tale. Instead, the Gospel of Luke begins his account by placing it solidly in the context of history. This is something that really happened in space and time. It is rooted in historical fact.

Caesar Augustus is a reference to Gaius Octavius Augustus. This man was the nephew of Julius Caesar. He was the emperor of the Roman Empire. Augustus was famed as an administrative genius. His long reign was considered to be the golden age of Rome. Building projects abounded throughout the Empire. It was said that Augustus had “found Rome brick and left her marble.”

This was known as the time of Pax Romana, the peace of Rome. It would be during this time that the Prince of Peace would be born.

Under the rule of Augustus, the Roman Empire was reorganized and a regular system of



taxation was instituted. The Romans believed that someone else ought to pay for all of the Roman legions and the Roman roads and the Roman palaces which now covered the ancient world. Rather than place this burden of taxation upon her citizens, it was decided that those who had been conquered by Rome should pay for the privilege through taxation. And so, Augustus instituted a census which would dictate the amount of money each province would be required to collect. The plan of Augustus called for a census to be taken every fourteen years. This system of census-taking was to continue until 230 A.D.

As a result of the decree of Augustus in far off Rome, two Jewish people who live in the village of Nazareth will be forced to pack their belongings and travel seventy miles south to Bethlehem.

It seems that the Roman law dealing with the census dictated that anyone owning property in another city must present his tax statement in that city. The Jewish law of Jubilee further stated that all property reverted back to the possession of the original owners on the fiftieth year of Jubilee. This meant that Joseph and Mary, while perhaps not presently in possession of land in Bethlehem, still retained legal ownership of the land of their ancestors in that town. They were both descendants of David and could trace their ancestry back to that monarch.

Thus, we see God moving the Emperor of Rome so that two people are forced to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem so that, a baby will be

born there. God's providence works to the end that a prophecy which had been given five hundred years earlier might now be fulfilled.

*But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,  
too little to be among the clans of Judah,  
from you One will go forth for Me to be  
ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from  
long ago, from the days of eternity.  
(Micah 5:2).*

The Jews in the days of Augustus understood Micah's prophecy to be a promise of the coming Messiah. When Herod asks his court scribes where Messiah is to be born, they will refer to this same prophecy as they point to Bethlehem. The prophet had long since spoken. His promise was that the Messiah, the One who was "from the days of eternity," would come from the small town of Bethlehem. And so, at the appointed time, God moves the Emperor of Rome to institute a census which will affect the entire civilized world. The result is that a young Jewish girl will be in Bethlehem when she gives birth to her firstborn son.

Let us never lose sight of this truth. God is in control. Romans 13 tells us that it is God who has appointed and established each ruler who comes to power. He is in control of the principalities and powers and the governing authorities of this world. He is in control of those "chance happenings" that come about in our lives.

This ought to be a great source of comfort. Suppose that your father was the king of the mightiest nation of this whole planet. Would you be worried over small issues like a job or your rent or your car? Of course not! Our Father is the King of Kings! He is above all authority and power. Therefore, we can relax and trust Him in every situation. He was in control on that first Christmas so long ago. He is still in control today.

These verses at the beginning of Luke's Christmas story are very "secular" in their appearance. There is no mention of God or the Spirit. Instead we read of the mandate of a pagan emperor that sets things in motion and that has the effect of two common people leaving their home in one small, isolated, backwoods town and traveling to another small, isolated, backwoods town. From all outward appearances, it is Rome rather than the Lord who is in control of these events. It is only when we look at these events through the eyes of faith that we realize that God is at work behind the scenes in bringing His will to pass.

Here is the principle. When you pick up tomorrow's newspaper and see what is taking place in the world, what you see will be determined by what kind of eyes you use to read. If you read through secular eyes, then all you will see will be secular events. But if you learn to see through the eyes of faith, then you will see that God is at work in the world bringing forth His kingdom.

## THE BETHLEHEM STORY

*And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David, in order to register, along with Mary, who was engaged to him, and was with child. (Luke 2:4-5).*

Our passage begins with Mary and Joseph leaving their home in Galilee amid traveling south. It was a long tiresome journey for one traveling on foot, and it must have been especially so for the young virgin who was with child.

I can imagine them on the last day of their trip as they pass through the bustling city of Jerusalem gazing in reverent awe at the towering Temple of God and then southward toward Bethlehem. Their route takes them through lush fields and grassy meadows dotted with grazing sheep. Finally, as the sun begins to set into the western hills, their goal comes into view.

Bethlehem. The small town perched atop a ridge five miles to the south of the city of Jerusalem. Although politically insignificant, it possessed a rich history. It was near this village that Jacob had buried Rachel, who was often thought of as the mother of the Jews (Genesis 35:19). It is only fitting that the Son of God

should be born where the mother of the Jews had been laid to rest.

It was here that Ruth met Boaz and married him after he had paid the redemption price of the kinsman redeemer. So it is right that the Redeemer of the world should also be born here.

It was in Bethlehem that David was born who would go on to be the king of Israel. By the same token, the One who is to sit on the throne of David, the Messiah of Israel, will also be born here.

Bethlehem. The name is Hebrew for “House of Bread.” In this town would be born the One who is the Bread of Life.

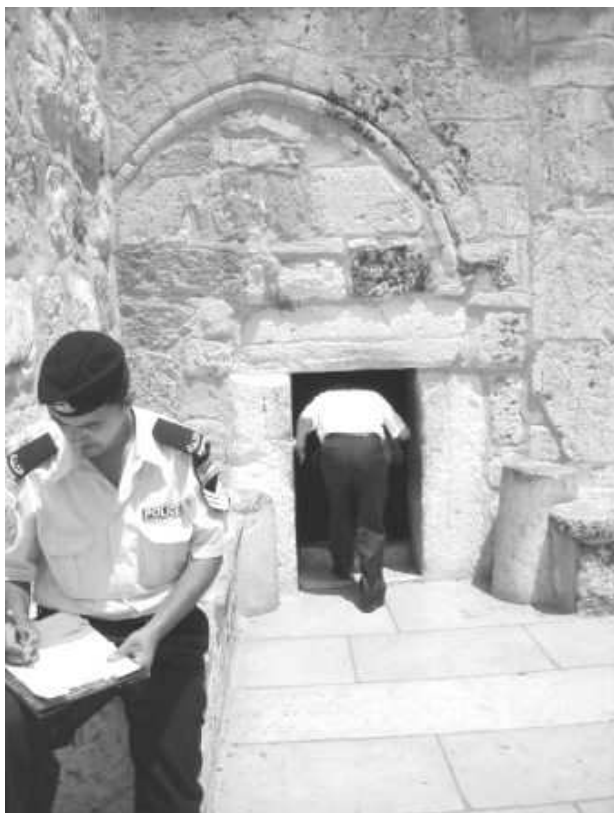
As Mary and Joseph approach the village, walking through rich and fertile fields of grain for which the ancient town has been named, they feel a sense of relief. Their long journey is over. They have arrived at their destination. Now they can rest. After all, they are from Bethlehem. This is the village of their forefathers. They likely have family here.

Our English translation says that there was no room in the inn. That might not be the best translation of the Greek text. The reason I know this is because, later in the Gospel of Luke, the translators took this same word for “inn” and translated it as “upper room.” It describes what would be the family room or living quarters of a house.

Finding no room in suitable accommodations, Joseph finally locates a secluded spot for his laboring betrothed. Justin Martyr tells us that it

was a stable within a cave on the outskirts of the village that the virgin brought forth her child. it is a mere stable. Thus, we can imagine that only the animals of the field were present. as the Lamb of God was born.

My wife and I were in Bethlehem in 2007. It looks a lot different than it would have looked in the days of Jesus. For one thing, it is bigger. But it is also filled with churches. The one that captured both my eye and my attention was the Church of the Nativity.



Entrance to the Church of the Nativity. You must bow to enter.

It is an ancient structure, having been built by Helena, the mother of the Christian Emperor Constantine. She meant well as she sought to preserve the site of the birth of Christ, though I often wish that she had just left it as she found it. The church that she built was destroyed in the 600's and then rebuilt and has been through numerous face lifts, though it still captures the feel of an ancient structure.

You can still see the outline of the large ancient doorway to the front of the church, but this has been walled over, leaving only a small doorway which you must stoop in order to enter. My guide told me that this was done in the days of the Crusaders to stop them from riding their horses into the church, but it has the effect today that all who try to enter the church must bow as they enter.

This serves as a reminder that the baby Jesus did not stay that way. He did not remain a baby. He was born to die and His death demands a response on your part. You cannot leave Him in the manger. You must see Him at the right hand of the Majesty on High. You must bow the knee before Him and confess that He is Lord.

## THE MANGER AND THE SHEPHERDS

Silver starlight gleaming down from the velvet vault of heaven falls gently onto the rolling hills of Judea. The bare ghost of a breeze gently stirring the chilly night air. The occasional bleat of the sheep. Throw another log on the campfire. Its crackling flame casts long jumping shadows. Simple country shepherds gathered around the blaze in an effort to warm themselves as they keep their midnight vigil.

*And in the same region there were some shepherds staying out in the fields, and keeping watch over their flock by night. (Luke 2:8).*

When we first read this, we are tempted to romanticize these shepherds. We think of pristine Christmas cards and church nativity scenes. But being a shepherd had a different connotation in that day. Shepherds were rather low on the social scale. Because they were out watching their sheep, they did not often make it to the various religious services. Because the constant duty, they were not often invited to share a meal or to partake in social occasions. Being a shepherd in that day might have been similar to being a trucker today, always on the go, irregular hours, constantly away from home.



Yet these are the ones to whom God chose to announce the birth of His Son. Not the priests in the temple. Not the rabbis in the synagogues. Not the kings in their palaces or the emperor seated in Rome. The message was given to a group of sheep herders.

Can you imagine that fateful night? One of the shepherds breaks away from the hypnotic flickering of the campfire to check the sheep. Satisfied that his charges are safe, he lets his gaze sweep upward to the midnight sky and its vast array of stars. Perhaps he remembers the familiar words of the Psalmist as he ponders the glory and majesty of the God of creation who has wrought the cosmos with His fingertips.

Yes indeed, the heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament of the sky shows forth His handiwork. But on this night as these simple shepherds gaze into the heavenly expanse, they are about to experience that which is beyond their wildest dreams.

There is a beautiful significance in the fact that the first announcement after the birth of Jesus should be made to shepherds. It seems fitting that the arrival of the Lamb of God should first be made known to shepherds and that shepherds should be the first to learn of the birth of the Great Shepherd.

Furthermore, it is possible that these shepherds were keeping the flocks which had been designated for the Temple sacrifices. The Mishnah (the oral collection of Jewish interpretations of the Scriptures) states that only

the Temple flocks were to be kept within the land of Israel. All other sheep must be kept in the wilderness areas. If this is true, then these shepherds take on an even deeper significance. The sheep which they are watching on this fateful night are destined to be sacrificed in the Jewish Temple.

Each morning and each evening a sacrifice is offered. A lamb is taken and is killed to provide the forgiveness of sins. Day after day. Month after month. Year after year. For over a thousand years, this unending ceremony had taken place. And it was never enough. Today's sacrifice must again be repeated tomorrow. With an endless succession of tomorrows. Endless observances. Endless sacrifices.

There was a promise. It was a promise which had come down from the Hebrew prophets of One who would put an end to sin. One who would be like a Lamb led to slaughter. One who would have laid upon Himself the iniquities of all.

On this night, these simple shepherds are going to see the beginnings of the fulfillment of that promise. Heaven will touch earth and God will draw near.

God had dealt with men in the past. In many times and in many ways He had spoken to the fathers through the prophets. But now He was going to draw near in a new way. Now He would become a baby. A baby! The very picture of helplessness. The One who holds the earth in His hands would be held in the arms of a young Jewish girl. The One who made the worlds would

be cared for at the hands of a poor construction worker.

And yet, there is something appealing about a baby. Everyone loves a baby. And so, when God desired to draw near to men, He came as a baby. God has drawn near. And that has made all the difference in the world.

But as our story opens, the shepherds knew nothing of this. Their life was their sheep. When we read that they were in the fields, that does not mean they were on the edge of the village. It would not do to have the sheep eating the crops of the neighboring farmers. Instead, they would be on the edge of the wilderness.

*And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were terribly frightened. (Luke 2:9).*

Can you picture the scene? The shepherds are gathered around their campfire, trying to warm themselves against the chilly night air. Suddenly there is a light. The shadows and blackness of the night give way to a sudden brilliance. Before them in the blazing light stands an awesome creature - an angel.

The shepherds are terrified. In the penetrating light of the majestic spectacle, they suddenly realize what sinful and lowly beings they really are. And then the angel speaks.

*And the angel said to them, "Do not*

*be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which shall be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” (Luke 2:10-11).*

The angel begins by telling the shepherds not to be afraid. This is usually the first thing an angel says when speaking to a mortal man. I imagine that in the angelic handbook under the chapter heading under “Bringing Messages to Humans” it says that the angels are to begin all conversations with the words “Don’t be afraid.” Why is that? Because angels are different. And the presence of an angelic being forces me to recognize that there is an even more powerful God who sent that angel. When I am confronted with the reality of the reflection of God’s holiness in His messenger, my reaction is fear. But the good news is that I do not have to be afraid. I do not have to be afraid because the awesome messenger of God has brought a message of salvation. When I am confronted with the wondrous holiness of God, the result is fear. But when I hear the message that the holiness of God has drawn near in the form of a baby, then the result is joy.

After all, no one was ever afraid of a baby. When God spoke through a burning bush, Moses was afraid. When God spoke from Sinai and the earth trembled and the mountain quaked and the people fell down and pleaded for an intercessor lest they die. When God spoke in dreams and in

visions, men had reason to fear because He was mysterious and holy. But when God wanted to dispel all fear, He came as a baby. Because He has come as a baby, fear has been replaced by joy. Because He has come as a baby, we can come with confidence before the throne of God.

*“For today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” (Luke 2:11).*

Jesus was not born into a vacuum. His birth had been promised from the very beginning. At the dawning of human history, the promise had been given. As the crunch of the forbidden fruit echoed through the Garden of Eden, the prophecy was told that a Deliverer would come, one who would...

Overturn the works of the Serpent  
Defeat death  
Save men from their sins.

The shepherds understand this. When they are told that the identity of this newborn Savior is “Christ the Lord” they need no further explanation. Even though they are relatively ignorant and unlearned men, they have been taught from childhood that there is coming one who would be anointed by God, a Messiah. They may even have been familiar with the prophecy from the book of Micah that the Messiah was to be born in nearby Bethlehem, the ancestral home of King David. But how are they to recognize the newborn King? Will he be found in a palace,

perhaps clothed in rich purple silks and lying in a golden cradle? The shepherds need a sign.

*“And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths, and lying in a manger.” (Luke 2:12).*

Now these shepherds are also given a sign. It is a twofold sign. First, they will find the baby wrapped in cloths. The Chosen King and Savior will be found, not in rich purple silks, but wrapped in simple and common cloth devoid of any great worth or significance.<sup>1</sup>

The second part of the sign is that the baby will be found lying in a manger. These shepherds may not know a lot about babies, but they know all about mangers. A manger is a tool of their trade. The last place that they would ever think to look for a newborn baby, much less a newborn King, is in a manger. I don’t think they could have been more surprised than if you had been told to look for the Messiah in a dumpster. A feeding trough for animals. No more humble surroundings could be imagined. Majesty in the midst of the mundane. Holiness entering the world

On the dirty floor of a stable.

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<sup>1</sup> There is a popular urban legend that suggests the Greek term for these cloths makes reference to burial wrappings. There is no justification to such an idea and the same Greek word (σπαργανον) and its related cognates are used in the Septuagint of Job 38:9, Wisdom 7:4 and Ezekiel 16:4 to speak of the wrappings of a baby.

Through the womb of a teenager.

In the presence of a poor construction worker.

Notice that the baby wrapped in clothes and laying in a manger is not described as two separate signs. They are a single sign. A sign is significant. That is what makes it a sign. To see the significance of this sign, I think you have to put the two of them together and see it as they would have seen it.



Stone manger in Israel.

The problem is that most of us have never seen a Jewish manger. At Christmastime we usually see the Northern European counterpart, a wooden feeding trough for animals. They are made of wood because wood is very commonplace in Northern Europe. But that was not the case in ancient Israel. Wood was a valuable commodity; far too valuable to be used to feed animals. Mangers in ancient Israel were always made of stone. Typically a rock would be hewn so that it had an opening at the top to create a place where the food or water could be placed.

Now we come to the sign for which the shepherds are to search. It will be a baby wrapped in cloths and lying on a slab of rock. While this is unusual, this also serves as a very significant sign. It points to what will be the goal of this baby. He will not remain a baby. He will eventually grow up and live and die so that, at the end of the story, His dead body will lie wrapped in cloths and lying on a stone slab.

Do you see it? The sign for which the shepherds were to look was the acting out of a death and a burial. The sign signified what would come about. It signified that this baby was destined to die and be wrapped in clothes. But that is not the end of the story. The death and the burial was followed by a resurrection. This was the ultimate sign.

The world today is looking for a sign. Astrology is at an all-time high. Religious charlatans abound. Hucksters can even be found in the House of God. And although God



sometimes works through the dramatic, the pillar of fire, the parting of the sea, the making of the sun to stand still, more often than not, His signs are like the one which the shepherds saw.

A baby in a manger. You can miss it if you try. There were a lot of people in and around Bethlehem who didn't see the sign. It is not that they weren't looking for Messiah. They were. They were looking for a great and mighty prophet like unto Moses. They were looking for a great high priest who could make the final sacrifice on their behalf. They were looking for a conquering King of a white charger.

A prophet. A priest. A King. Jesus was all of that. But because He came in the midst of humility, people didn't recognize Him when He came. And when He died and was buried, even His disciples thought that was the end of the story.

You can still miss Him if you try. What are you going through lately? Think of your most difficult situation. Did you see Christ in that? He is there. When it is Friday and everything looks bleak and dark with only death ahead, remember that Sunday is coming.

*And it came about when the angels  
had gone away from them into heaven,  
that the shepherds began saying to one  
another, "Let us go straight to  
Bethlehem then, and see this thing that  
has happened which the Lord has made  
known to us."*

*And they came in haste and found*

*their way to Mary and Joseph, and the baby as He lay in the manger. (Luke 2:15-16).*

Can you imagine them running through the town, knocking on doors and waking everyone up while trying to search each barn and manger in the village? At last, they come to the place where Joseph and Mary and the Child are staying. There they are! And there is the Child, just as the angel promised.

What now? (There is a “what now”). The confirmation of the message produces a reaction on their part. The reaction is that they begin to proclaim the news. No one had to tell them that they ought to witness. They didn’t enroll in Evangelism classes.

*And when they had seen this, they made known the statement which had been told them about this Child.*

*And all who heard it wondered at the things which were told them by the shepherds. (Luke 2:17-18).*

Their reaction was spontaneous. They would have found it difficult not to spread the news. You see, true faith always brings about action. It is as simple as the law of physics which states that every action produces a corresponding reaction. This has been called a law of nature, but it is really a law of God who created nature. As God’s law is true in the physical realm, so it is also true

in the spiritual realm. Faith always brings about a corresponding reaction.

How about you? I know that you have the ability to witness. If you have come to faith in Jesus Christ, then you have the ability to tell others of the One in whom you have believed. But have you come to the point where it is a spontaneous reaction? If you have not, then I am not going to try to lay a guilt trip on you or to tell you that you need to share the gospel with five people this week. What I am going to do and what I have been doing is trying to help you to see the wonder of it all. Once you see the beauty of God's gift, you will not be able to do any less than those shepherds did. You will not be able to hold still without telling someone else of that same beauty.

A many years ago I got a telephone call from Paula, my wife. She said to me, "John, stop what you are doing and go outside and look at the sunset." I did it and I have to admit that it was spectacular. What was it that motivated her to call me? Was it that she felt a wifely duty to make such a call? No. It was because she had seen a picture of great beauty and she had to share it with someone. I am sure you have had a similar experience. When you come to see the beauty of Jesus, you will not be able to refrain from sharing that beauty with others.

## STORIES FROM THE TEMPLE

We normally think of the Christmas Story as the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem and the coming of the shepherd and the wise men. But there were other events that took place during these early days. The following chronological chart might be helpful in seeing the flow of events:

Day 0:	Jesus is born in Bethlehem; the shepherds are told and they come to see
Day 8:	Jesus is circumcised
Day 40:	Jesus is brought to the temple in Jerusalem and presented to the Lord
Day 41+:	The Wise Men come to worship Jesus; Joseph and his family flee to Egypt but later return to Nazareth.

In the days in which Jesus was born, there were four legal ordinances which were required by every Jewish parent that had given birth to a firstborn son. It is within the setting of these ordinances that our story will take place. This first of these ordinances was the rite of circumcision. This took place eight days after the birth of the son and could take place in a home. But some four weeks after that, Mary and Joseph were required by the Law to bring their child to the Temple in Jerusalem.

*And when the days for their purification according to the law of Moses were completed, they brought Him up to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every first-born male that opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord"), and to offer a sacrifice according to what was said in the Law of the Lord, "A pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons. (Luke 2:22-24).*

This ceremony of purification goes all the way back to the Old Testament. It was given by God to the Jews as a part; of the Mosaic Law. It is found in Leviticus 12.

*Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak to the sons of Israel, saying, When a woman gives birth and bears a male child, then she shall be unclean for seven days, as in the days of her menstruation she shall be unclean. And on the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. Then she shall remain in the blood of her purification for thirty-three days; she shall not touch any consecrated thing, nor enter the sanctuary, until the days of her purification are completed." (Leviticus 12:1-4).*

According to the Mosaic Law, the mother of a child was considered to be unclean. Why is this? I'm not sure. Perhaps it was to serve as a reminder that she had just given birth to a sinful, fallen creature.

Thus, in the case of the birth of a son, the mother was banned from performing any religious duties for a period of 41 days (8 days prior to the circumcision plus 33 days following the circumcision). After the 41 days had elapsed, then it was necessary for the mother to go to the temple and offer up a sin offering and a burnt offering for an atonement.

Why were these offerings so important? They were to teach that sin must be dealt with. Any uncleanness demanded separation from God. The only way that fellowship with God could be restored was through the death of an innocent substitute.

This sacrificial system was really an illustration of what Jesus would do for us on the cross. He became our sacrifice for sin. He substituted Himself on the cross on our behalf. He died instead of us. This brings us to the other ordinance that was required. It was the ordinance of presentation.

*They brought Him up to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord (2:22).* This was the third ordinance that was commanded in the Law for the birth of a firstborn son. This ordinance dated all the way back to the time of the Exodus. It was the command of God to Moses.

*Then the Lord spoke to Moses,*

*saying, "Sanctify to Me every firstborn, the first offspring of every womb among the sons of Israel, both man and beast; it belongs to Me." (Exodus 13:1-2).*

In the days when God had brought judgment down upon Egypt, the greatest plague had been the death of the firstborn. God had killed the firstborn of every man and animal in the entire land of Egypt. The only way to escape had been to slaughter an innocent lamb and to smear its blood upon the doorposts of the house.

When the angel of the Lord came to a house with blood on the doorposts, the firstborn within that house was reckoned to have already been dead. On this basis, the angel passed over that house. Because of this, God states that each of the firstborn of Israel are His: They are reckoned to have forfeited their lives. Therefore, they must be bought back. They must be ransomed. They must be redeemed.

*Now it shall come about when the Lord brings you to the land of the Canaanite, as He swore to you and to your fathers, and gives it to you, <sup>12</sup> that you shall devote to the Lord the first offspring of every womb, and the first offspring of every beast that; you own; the males belong to the Lord.*

*But every first offspring of a donkey you shall redeem with a lamb, but if you do not redeem it,, then you shall break*

*its neck; for every first-born of man among your sons you shall redeem.”  
(Exodus 13:11-13).*

The male firstborn of every man or animal belonged to the Lord. If they were to be allowed to live, then their lives must be purchased from the Lord.

This was also an illustration of what Jesus would do on the cross. He would redeem us who were dead in sin in order that we might have His righteousness reckoned to our behalf. The purchase price would be His own blood. A life would be paid for a life.

The Child has been born in Bethlehem. Joseph and Mary decide to wait in Bethlehem and reside there for the next month until that can make the trip to the temple for the purification and presentation ceremonies.

On the eighth day, the child is circumcised and named Jesus. The next four weeks pass swiftly for the small family. Possibly by now they are no longer in a stable, having found suitable, yet humble lodgings.

Finally, it is the appointed day. Mary and Joseph and the Child rise up early in the morning. They do not pack all of their belongings, for they will be returning to Bethlehem in the evening. Then they set off for Jerusalem, five miles to the north.

Jerusalem. This is the religious center of their world. It is the city of God. Today they bypass the crowded marketplace where merchants



are selling their wares. Today they are going to the temple. It stands on the eastern edge of the city, atop a sharp ridge which gives a commanding view over the rest of the city. There is hardly a place in all Jerusalem where you cannot look up and see the temple.



Model of the complex of Herod's Temple

Mary and Joseph climb the broad stairway and enter through the Huldah Gate into the vast Court of the Gentiles. Carrying the infant Child, they come to a stone wall on which is written a solemn warning in Greek and Latin forbidding all Gentiles from passing any further. They pass through the narrow gate and climb the 14 steps up to the Gate Beautiful. Moving through this gate, they find themselves in the Court of the Women.

Mary places money into one of the offering chests. It is the price of a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons. This is the poor man's offering. This is for the purification ceremony. Now she climbs the 15 steps up to the majestic Nicanor Gate and stands at the threshold. She is permitted to go no further. But from here, she can see into the Court of the Priests and the temple itself.

One of the officiating priests comes to her, sprinkling her with the sacrificial blood and declaring her to be cleansed. She will now offer up her infant Child, and then pay the ransom price to receive the Child back again. As she is about to offer up the Child, she is interrupted. It is an old man.

*And behold, there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; and this man was righteous and devout, looking for the consolation of Israel; and the Holy Spirit was upon him.*

*And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. (Luke 2:25-26).*

This man was named Simeon. It was an Old Testament name. It was a name of one of the sons of Jacob. The original Simeon had been an answer to Leah's prayer. She had prayed that she would have a son and the Lord had answered her prayer.

Therefore, she had named her son "Simeon" (hearing) because God had heard her prayer.

Here is a man with the same name. We know very little about him. But we do know that God

Although the Levitical ceremony in the temple is the setting for this narrative, our focus is not brought to its details, but rather to the two people who interrupted that ceremony. God did not use the officiating priest, but rather a couple of people who were "in the church pew" to deliver his message.

had answered his prayers. He was looking for the “consolation of Israel.” The reference to a “consolation” implies the presence of a problem. You look for consolation where there is a problem over which you need to be consoled.

When a child comes to his mother for consolation, her first words are to ask, “What is wrong?” A child comes for consolation because he has skinned his knee or broken a toy or because something wrong has taken place and he is seeking to have someone make it right.

Simeon had a sense that all was not right in the world and that all was not right with Israel. There was a need of consolation. It was a need that could only be fulfilled by the promised Messiah. Simeon was looking for the Messiah and God had answered his prayer with a promise.

*It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. (Luke 2:26).*

Here was a man who could not die until the appointed time. He would not die until he had seen the Messiah. Does this surprise you? Do you wish that you had a similar promise from God? Well, I have good news for you. You have one, too.

*See now that I, I am He, and there is no god besides Me; it is I who put to death and give life. I have wounded, and*

*it is I who heal; and there is no one who  
can deliver from My hand.  
(Deuteronomy 32:39).*

This is more than just a promise to the nation of Israel. This is a description of the character of God. God's character has not changed. He still puts to death and gives life. You will not, die until God's plan in your life has been completed, and that when it is completed, you will not live a moment longer.

However, the promise given to Simeon was more specific. He was told that he would not die until he had seen the Lord's Christ. The word "Christ" is a Greek word. It literally means "the anointed one." It is the term which is translated in Hebrew as "Messiah.

Now the Spirit moves Simeon into the temple in Jerusalem at the very moment that Mary and Joseph and the Child are there. Immediately, Simeon recognizes the Child for who He really is. Here is a man with spiritual perception. None of the temple priests recognize this Child as the Messiah. No rabbi has stopped to determine that this Child is the Holy One of God. None of the other worshipers have paused to discover the true identity of this Child. But this one old man saw the Child and recognized Him for who He was, God's Anointed One.

*And he came in the Spirit into the  
temple; and when the parents brought in  
the child Jesus, to carry out for Him the*

*custom of the Law, 28 then he took Him into his arms, and blessed God, and said,*

*“Now Lord, let Your bond-servant depart in peace, according to Your word;*

*For my eyes have seen Your salvation, Which You have prepared in the presence of all peoples,*

*A light of revelation to the Gentiles, And the glory of Your people Israel.”*  
*(Luke 2:27-32).*

Can you imagine how Simeon felt to hold the Messiah in his arms? This little baby was the promised Redeemer! Upon this tiny infant hinged the salvation of the world! It is no wonder that Simeon breaks into song and praises the Lord.

He says, *Let Your bond-servant depart in peace.* These are striking words. We normally take them to be spoken by an old man at the end of his life. But the passage does not actually tell us that Simeon was an old man. It only tells us that it had been revealed to him that he would not die until he had seen the Lord's salvation. Now that had happened. This little baby is the embodiment of God's salvation of men.

Simeon is really saying, “Okay, lord, I'm ready to die.” Here was a man who had lived his life looking to the day when he could see the Messiah. In his mind, nothing greater could ever happen in his life. This is the climax of his life. Nothing else can ever compare to this one

moment. No matter what else takes place, it will be anticlimactic for him.

*“This Child is appointed for the fall and rise of many in Israel” (2:34).* Depending on whether the Jews accepted or rejected Jesus as their Messiah and King, they would decide their future destiny.

Those who rejected Jesus as their King would call. One of the greatest examples of this fall would be in 70 A.D. when the Roman general Titus would sack Jerusalem and carry off its inhabitants into slavery. On the other hand, those Jews who accepted Jesus as their King will find themselves as heirs of the kingdom.

*“And a sword will pierce even your own soul” (2:35).* To whom is Simeon speaking? He is speaking to Mary. Something will happen that will bring her inner pain. It will strike deep. It will be a sorrow so sharp that it will be as though a sword has cut through her.

Mary is going to witness the death of Her Son. She is going to see Him rejected and tried and mocked and crucified like some common criminal.

*And there was a prophetess, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having lived with a husband seven years after her marriage, and then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. And she never left the temple, serving night and day with fastings and prayers.*

*And at that very moment she came up and began giving thanks to God, and continued to speak of Him to all those who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. (Luke 2: 36-38).*

This woman's name was Anna. It is a Hebrew name. The Hebrew form of this name, Hanniah, was the name of the mother of Samuel the prophet. This woman in our passage had been a widow for many years. She is now 84 years old.

Now I want to ask you a question. Does God use women in the ministry? Absolutely. This woman had a wonderful ministry.

She was a prophetess.

She fasted regularly.

She was constantly in prayer.

The realm of her ministry was within the temple. The temple, with its symbolic testimonies to the promised Messiah, was something on which Anna had spent many hours meditating. Thus when the Messiah-Child actually appeared in the temple, she was quick to recognize Him.

There were many Jews who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. Simeon had been such a man — we saw that he was looking for the “consolation of Israel” (Luke 2:25). Zacharias had praised God for accomplishing redemption for His people (Luke 1:68). Now we see that there were many who were looking for the “redemption

of Jerusalem.”

Do you see what is happening? God is already preparing people for the ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus. It will be thirty years before their ministries actually begin, but God is already at work preparing people's hearts.

There is a principle here. It is that God prepares the way. Maybe you are going through hard times. Maybe you are facing a dry period in your life. Maybe you are journeying through the valley of the shadow of death. I have a message for you. It is a message of comfort and encouragement. God has prepared a way. You may not be able to see it. Your situation may look hopelessly tangled. But God has prepared a way.



## THE KING'S STORY

One of the great heros of the Old Testament was Moses. He stood before the pharaoh, the ruler of the greatest power on the face of the earth and demanded the release of God's people. As we come to the second chapter of Matthew, we see Jesus portrayed in a fashion that is reminiscent of Moses.

Moses	Jesus
The Pharaoh orders that all of the Hebrew male children are to be put to death.	Herod orders that all of the male children of Bethlehem are to be put to death.
Moses is saved by being placed into an ark on the Nile.	Jesus is saved by being taken to Egypt, the land of the Nile.

Interestingly, the contrast and comparison goes even further when we examine the popular stories that were told in Jesus' day concerning Moses. Josephus relates the story of a prophecy of the birth of Moses.

*A further incident had the effect of stimulating the Egyptians yet more to exterminate our race. One of the sacred*

*scribes -- persons with considerable skill in accurately predicting the future -- announced to the king that there would be born to the Israelites at that time one who would abase the sovereignty of the Egyptians and exalt the Israelites, were he reared to maturity, and would surpass all men in virtue and win everlasting renown. Alarmed thereat, the king, on this sages advice, ordered that every male child born to the Israelites should be destroyed by being cast into the river. (Antiquities 4).*

While I am not suggesting that the extra-Biblical story told by Josephus is necessarily true, it does suggest that the Lord's design for the coming of Jesus was in fulfillment, not only of the actual pattern presented by Moses, but even of the popular stories that had arisen about him. Dale Allison points out how the words of Matthew are echoed in the Septuagint of Exodus, the Greek translation of that book (1997:142-3).

<b>Matthew</b>	<b>Exodus LXX</b>
But when Herod died, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt,	After these many days the king of Egypt died  The Lord said to Moses in Midian:

<p>saying, “Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those seeking the life of the child have died.” And he rose and took  the child, and his mother,  and went unto the land of Israel</p>	<p>“Go back to Egypt, for all those seeking your life have died.” Moses, taking his wife and his children,  mounted them on asses, and returned to the land of Egypt (MT).</p>
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The parallel is there and I believe it to be deliberate. That is, Matthew wants you to hear the story of Jesus and to hear how there are certain elements in the story that remind you of Moses. It might be that this is the reason his account passes over the details of the actual birth of Jesus, the manger and the shepherds. He is not trying to give an exhaustive account; he is seeking to paint a true but specific picture of Jesus as the One who is better than Moses.

*Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king... (Matthew 2:1a).*

This chapter begins “after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea.” This is the first mention that Matthew has made of Bethlehem. He passes completely over the details of the actual birth of

Christ. The long journey to Bethlehem. The crowded inn. The humble stable. The baby in the manger. The shepherds whispering their story of angels in the night. These are all recorded in Luke's account. But Matthew is silent about them. I don't think it was that Matthew did not know about those stories. But they are not central to his theme. Matthew wants to present Jesus in a particular way. The theme of Matthew's entire book will be to show that Jesus is king. And so, he bypasses the birth narrative to focus upon an incident which took place at least a month and a half after the birth of Jesus.

Matthew wants us to see Jesus as king and he does this by comparing him to another king; a King known as Herod. To understand Herod, our story must go back sixty years prior to the birth of Christ to a time when Israel was in the midst of a civil war.

The year was 63 B.C. There were two contenders for the throne. They were brothers. Their names are not important, but what is important is that they both sent envoys to the Roman General Pompey the Great, each asking for his assistance. Pompey gave assistance, but not the kind for which they had asked. He marched to Jerusalem and took it for himself and for Rome. In one fell swoop, Israel became a possession of Rome. The kingdom of Judah was renamed Judea.

Pompey did not trust either of the brothers, so he chose another man to be the real power behind the throne of Israel. He chose a foreigner, an

Idumean prince named Antipater. Antipater moved to place his two sons in power. His oldest son, Phaesel, was put in charge of Judea. His younger son was given Galilee; that son's name was Herod.

All went well until Antipater died in 40 B.C. The Jews saw his death as an opportunity to regain their freedom from Rome and they made a deal with the Parthian Empire to the east. The Parthians lived in the land which today is known as Iran and they had been traditional enemies of Rome. With the help of the Parthians, the Jews revolted, killing Phaesel. Herod barely escaped with his life. He made his way to Rome where he was sponsored by Marc Antony and young Octavius, nephew to Julius Caesar.

There, before the Senate and the people of Rome, Herod was crowned king of the Jews. However, he was a king without a kingdom. He was given command of a Roman legion to put down the rebellion and repel the Parthian invaders. After several years of fighting, Herod finally recaptured the kingdom for Rome.

Herod now began a reign that was to continue for the next 33 years. It would be a reign which was a curious mixture of peace and persecution, or prosperity and crushing taxation. On the one hand, he expanded and rebuilt the Temple grounds to a dimension that was far greater than even the days of Solomon had seen. Because Israel possessed no natural harbors, Herod decided to build one. He had a 200 foot wide breakwater constructed at Caesarea which is an engineering

marvel even today. On the other hand, if the economy grew and developed throughout the reign of Herod, his family life was a reflection of the hatred his subjects had for him. In order to secure his position on the throne and to win the acceptance of the Jews, Herod took as his wife and queen Mariamne, the last of the old Hasmonean Dynasty which had ruled Israel prior to the coming of Rome.

Herod had one big problem in ruling over the Jews. He was not Jewish. He was an Idumean by birth, of the descendants of Esau. Therefore the Jews never accepted him and were always seeking to overthrow him. Herod began to uncover a number of assassination plots which were designed to place his two sons by Mariamne on the throne in his place. Eventually, Herod murdered Mariamne in a fit of rage and the later had her two sons murdered along with another son by a different wife.

As our story opens, this man had ruled for over thirty years in a land where even his own family had turned against him and sought his overthrow. Now at the end of his life, he had become moody, jealous and suspicious. He had killed many times to protect his throne and he would kill again.

*Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, <sup>2</sup> "Where is He who has been born King of the*

*Jews? For we saw His star in the east,  
and have come to worship Him.”  
(Matthew 2:1-2).*

When we read about the Magi, we are inclined to think of Christmas card pictures of three kings or three “wise men.” The truth is that the Magi were an ancient order of priests from Parthia. They believed in one God who had created all things and who was the author of all that was good. They allowed no images or statues into their temples.

In the days of Herod, the Magi had become a very powerful political body. No Parthian King was ever permitted to rule on the throne of Parthia until he had first been accepted by the Magi.

Do you remember who Herod had to fight to regain Israel? It was the Parthians! You can imagine his consternation as a delegation of Parthian King-makers arrive in Jerusalem, seeking the one who has been “born King of the Jews.” This question hit a sore spot with Herod. At present, Herod is the king of the Jews. But Herod was never born the King of the Jews. He is a foreigner. He is not a true king. He is not of the royal line of David. He is not even Jewish. He has never been accepted by the Jews.

The Magi claim that they had first seen a star while they were in the east that has special significance. They indicate that the star had appeared at a specific time. In verse 7 Herod will ask the Magi exactly when the star appeared. It does not seem that the star was necessarily now

visible as they come to Jerusalem. It appeared while they were in the east and then it had disappeared. Later on it would reappear and lead them to a certain house in Bethlehem.

A lot of speculation has been put forth as to the nature of this star. Some have supposed that it was a comet. Others have suggested that it was a nova. It has been pointed out that on December 4, 7 B.C. there was a triple conjunction of Mars, Jupiter and Saturn. However, none of these occurrences would have served to point out the exact house in Bethlehem as this “star” will do.

What was this star? I don’t know. But I do know that it was God’s star and that it was sent to shine upon the One who had been sent to be the Light of the World.

*And when Herod the king heard it, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And gathering together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he began to inquire of them where the Christ was to be born. And they said to him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet, 6 and you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, are by no means least among the leaders of Judah, for out of you shall come forth a Ruler who will shepherd My people Israel.” (Matthew 2:3-6).*

I want you to try to picture the situation. One day a caravan arrives in Jerusalem. This in itself



is not unusual. Caravans are always arriving in Jerusalem. However, these are no ordinary merchants. They are Magi from the east. They are from the land of Herod's enemies, the Parthians. They are from the same Parthians who had forced him to flee for his life over thirty years ago.

The Parthians have been at war with Rome during all these years. Herod has remained loyal to Rome. Now this group of religious King-Makers have come to Jerusalem. We do not know how many were in the party. Undoubtedly there were many. They are all asking the same question: "Where is the new King who has been born?"

The news reaches Herod. Could this be a plot on the part of the Parthians to overthrow him and place another on his throne. Herod has heard nothing of a newborn king. As Herod hears reports from the Magi, it becomes evident to him that they have come to seek out the Messiah, the One whose coming was foretold in the Old Testament Scriptures. Therefore Herod calls a convention. The chief priests and the scribes are called in. These are the experts. When they have all been assembled, Herod asks them a question:

"Where is the Messiah to be born?"

The experts all agree on the same answer. They are all of the same opinion. There is no debate. The Old Testament prophet Micah has made it very clear. The Messiah is to be born in

Bethlehem.

The Jewish scribes made it very clear that they knew all about the prophecy of where the Messiah would be born. Just as you know basic facts of history like who is buried in Grant's tomb, so also these scribes knew the basic facts about the Messiah. They were professional Bible students. They knew the Bible the way some people know baseball scores.

But as you read through the rest of Matthew, you do not see them doing anything with this knowledge. They do not go to Bethlehem, even though it is only five miles away. What are your five miles? What is keeping you from following the Lord? Most Christians do not have a lack of some basic knowledge of the Bible. Our problem is that we do not follow up on what we know.

What are your five miles? What are those things that you know you ought to do but are not doing? What are those things that you know you ought to be doing but to which you refuse to commit?

The Roman historian Suetonius reports the following in his book, *The Twelve Caesars*, in his chapter on the life of Vespasian: *An ancient superstition was current in the East, that out of Judea at this time would come the rulers of the world."*

Suetonius concluded that the prophecy must refer to one of the Roman emperors who went to Judea and who then came from there to Rome. But one cannot help but to wonder whether the superstition pointed back to Jesus.

*Then Herod secretly called the magi,  
and ascertained from them the time the*

*star appeared. 8 And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, "Go and make careful search for the Child; and when you have found Him, report to me, that I too may come and worship Him." (Matthew 2:7-8).*

Herod now begins to make his move. His plan is nothing less than the assassination of the Messiah. He plans to have the Child murdered before He can prove a threat.

Herod saw Jesus as a threat. He saw Jesus as an interference with his life. A lot of people see Jesus as only an interference. He gets in the way with what they want to do. A Christian is one who has stopped doing what he wants to do and who has started following Jesus instead. Herod has no intention of following Jesus. He has set himself up as king and there is room for no other. And so, he sets out to murder Jesus.

To do this, he pretends to have a friendly interest in the question of Messiah as he ascertains when the star first appeared. He assumes that the star would have appeared at just the time when the Child had been born. This is not necessarily correct. Just as angels had appeared to Zacharias and to Mary and to Joseph before the birth, and in the first two cases, even before the conception of the Child, so also the star could have appeared to the Magi at a much earlier date.

There is a principle here. It is that God's timing is perfect. He planned the appearing of the star so that the Magi would have just enough time

to arrive at Jerusalem and from there to Bethlehem before Joseph and Mary and the infant Jesus returned to their home in Nazareth.

Why didn't Herod go to Bethlehem with the Magi? There are probably several reasons. First, Herod was nearly 70 years old at this time and in very poor health. He would die within a few months. Herod might have concluded that it would take several days for the Magi to locate the newborn King. There was no hurry, since Bethlehem was only 5 miles from Jerusalem.

There has been a great deal of speculation as to what time of year in which Jesus was born. There is not enough evidence to even hazard an educated guess. Shepherds were to be found in the fields year round, so the events of Luke 2 could have taken place at any time in the year.

Furthermore, Herod had a signal system set up over a series of fortresses that could get a message to him within minutes. The Fortress Herodium overlooked the town of Bethlehem and no one could enter or leave the town without Herod being notified. Herod had all the bases covered. But he had failed to account for a God who is there and who moves in history.



The Herodium Fortress as seen from Bethlehem

*And having heard the king, they went on their way; and lo, the star, which they had seen in the East, went on before them, until it came and stood over where the Child was.*

*And when they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. <sup>10</sup> And they came into the house and saw the Child with Mary His mother; and they fell down and worshiped Him; and opening their treasures they presented to Him gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. (Matthew 2:9-11).*

As the Magi approach the tiny village of Bethlehem, the star reappears, leading them to the exact house where the Child is. This cannot be explained away as a natural event. This was no comet or nova or conjunction of planets. This was supernatural. That should not bother us. We have a supernatural God. He is the God who created nature and who intervenes in nature. He hardly ever checks with us to ask our permission.

*When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.* I can recall the excitement that was evident in taking a carload of kids to Disney World. That excitement knew no bound when we saw the sign saying, “Three miles to Disney World.” What had previously merely been anticipation was suddenly elevated to the very highest level of excitement. This “great joy” is a fulfillment of what the angels had prophesied

just a few weeks earlier to the shepherds.

*And the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which shall be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." (Luke 2:10-11).*

Notice that this good news was to be for all the people. It was not just for Jews. It was even for Parthian magi. It is for us, too.

Imagine the scene. Perhaps the sun has set and Mary and Joseph are just now sitting down to their evening meal. There is a knock at the door and Joseph rises from the table and goes to see who it could be. He opens the door and there is a whole caravan outside. There are richly-dressed noblemen from the lands to the east. "We have come to see the King!" They come and the fall and they worship.

Notice who is the object of this worship. They did not worship Mary. We are specifically told that Mary was present, but she was not the object of their adoration. They worshiped Jesus. He had been born in Bethlehem, the same city in which King David had been born. He had been born among the Jews, yet the Jews had thus far ignored Him. He had come to His own, but His own did not receive Him. But now, these Gentiles have come to worship Him. These King-Makers from Parthia have come to honor His kingship.

They do this by the giving of gifts.

Three gifts are mentioned: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Each of these three gifts was very valuable. The three together could well have represented a small fortune. People often visualize Jesus growing up in a very poor family, but this is not necessarily the case. They had been poor up to this point, but from this time on, Mary and Joseph would be financially secure.

Gold was a kingly gift. Frankincense was a type of perfume used in the Levitical offerings. It was also a kingly gift (Isaiah 60:6). Myrrh was a type of ointment which had two uses. It was a perfume and it was also a narcotic to ease pain. This wasn't the sort of gift that you would normally give to a king. But it is no less significant. I want to suggest that it was a gift that looked forward to the death of Jesus.

You see, Jesus came as a baby, but He didn't stay a baby. The baby grew up into a man. And as a man, He died for our sins. The tiny hands were destined to be pierced with nails. The little cheeks would one day have a beard ripped from them. That little body would be broken and bruised as it bore all of the righteous anger of God against sin.

During World War II, a father received news that his son only had been killed in combat. He was stricken with grief and when grief hits that hard you sometimes say things you don't really mean. His pastor came to visit him and he lashed out in a verbal assault, "Preacher, where was your God when my son was killed?" The pastor quietly

replied, "In the same place He was when His own Son was killed."

Do you see the point? It is that His death was no accident. What was death to Him was a gift of life to us. As we see the Magi presenting their gifts, we cannot help but notice that one of those gifts reflects the gift that the Child Himself would give.

*And having been warned by God in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed for their own country by another way.*

*Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, "Arise and take the Child and His mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is going to search for the Child to destroy Him." And he arose and took the Child and His mother by night, and departed for Egypt; and was there until the death of Herod, that what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet might be fulfilled, saying, "Out of Egypt did I call My Son." (Matthew 2:12-15).*

Once again, we see God intervening in the affairs of human history to protect His Son from the fate that men had planned. This was one time when Herod's signal corps and his system of fortifications completely failed. Under the cover of night, Joseph and his family slip out of



Bethlehem and turn their steps westward toward Egypt.

Herod missed his opportunity. I am not talking about his opportunity to capture or kill the baby Jesus; I am talking about the opportunity to recognize Jesus as the Messiah and to believe and to enter into eternal life. That and what takes place next are what turn this story into a tragedy.

*Then when Herod saw that he had been tricked by the magi, he became very enraged, and sent and slew all the male children who were in Bethlehem and in all its environs, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had ascertained from the magi.*

*Then that which was spoken through Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled, saying, "A voice was heard in Ramah, Weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children; And she refused to be comforted, Because they were no more."*

*But when Herod was dead, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, <sup>20</sup> "Arise and take the Child and His mother, and go into the land of Israel; for those who sought the Child's life are dead." <sup>21</sup> And he arose and took the Child and His mother, and came into the land of Israel. (Matthew 2:16-21).*

There are some who have read this passage and who have mistakenly concluded on the basis of Herod's order that Jesus must have been two years old. A more careful consideration of the passage shows this is not the case. If Herod had expected his prey to be two years of age, then his order would have included a safety margin so that all children between ages one and four would have been put to death.

In closing, I want to speak to those who may not know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. I want to draw your attention to the two kings we see in this chapter. On the one hand we have the Christ child. Holy. Pure. God sleeping in a stable. We see Him in this chapter as the recipients of the gifts of the Magi, but really He came to give the greatest gift of all. On the other hand is Herod. Jealous. Suspicious. A lying murderer. His only interest was in the preservation of his own wealth and power.

You have come today to worship before one of these two men. You might say, "John, I may not be a Christian, but that doesn't mean that I would worship Herod!" You are missing the point. If you have not become a disciple of Jesus, then you aren't merely worshipping Herod. You are Herod. You have set up yourself as king of your universe. God will not allow two kings to reign.

The story is told of Abraham Lincoln riding a horse that was skittish. The horse bucked and kicked and somehow managed to get one of its hind legs stuck in the stirrup. Lincoln quipped,

“Well, if you’re getting on, then I’m getting off.” Jesus is like that. He will only allow One to reign as King. In the end, only He shall reign.

Christmas isn’t only a time when we remember the first coming of the King. It is also a time when we look forward to the second coming of the King. The first time He came as a baby. The second time He will come with His legions. The invitation is that you meet Him the first time. The first time you will meet Him as your Savior. The second time you will meet Him as your Judge. How you meet Him the second time will depend upon how you have received Him the first time.

*For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. (John 3:16).*