

THE CHRISTMAS STORY

EXAMINING THE BIRTH OF CHRIST IN LIGHT OF

- *Scriptures from the Old Testament*
- *Scriptures from the Gospel Accounts*
- *Applications of the Truths to Our Lives Today*

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APPLICATION TO DAILY LIVING

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CHAPTER 1

THE ANNOUNCEMENT

Accounts of the events surrounding the birth of Jesus have many ties to passages in the Old Testament that find their fulfillment in the coming of the Messiah. For example, Isaiah 9:1-7 relates well to the New Testament account in Luke 1:26-38.

As we examine Old Testament prophecies we see that the birth of Jesus of Nazareth was an event planned by God from (before) the beginning. There are references to the coming of the Messiah in the Books of Moses. Many of the Psalms are Messianic in nature and Isaiah's prophecies, written some 800 years before the event, contain the most direct and specific predictions regarding the life of Jesus.

But [in the midst of judgment there is the promise and the certainty of the Lord's deliverance] there shall be no gloom for her who was in anguish. The former time the Lord brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time He will make it glorious, by the way of the Sea of Galilee, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in the land of intense darkness and the shadow of death, upon them has the light shined. You, O Lord, have multiplied the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before You like the joy in harvest, as men rejoice when they divide the spoil of battle. For the yoke of [Israel's] burden, and the staff or rod for [goading] his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, You have broken as in the day of [Gideon with] Midian. For every tramping warrior's warboots and all his armor in the battle tumult and every garment rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. For unto us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon His shoulder, and His name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father (of Eternity), Prince of Peace. Of the increase of His government and of peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David and over His kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from that latter time forth, even for evermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this. (Isaiah 9:1-7, Amplified Bible)

Isaiah wrote this prophecy as if it were a completed fact. I guess in God's sight all of history can be viewed as a completed fact. He knows the end from the beginning. As we study His Word, we too can know the outcome of this age. At the very least, we know goodness and righteousness will triumph over evil.

At the time of Isaiah's writings, the Northern Kingdom of Israel was a political mess. There were alliances being formed and broken with the surrounding nations and when the alliances didn't work out, the stronger nations would invade Israel to punish them. The territories occupied by the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali usually caught the brunt of the attacks. Hence Isaiah's reference to anguish and gloom and contempt. But things were going to be different. The darkness would be replaced with great light. If you compared maps of the Holy Land that show the area divided into tribes with the area in the time of Christ, you quickly see the town of Nazareth is in the territory of Zebulun and the area of the main ministry of Jesus, Capernaum and the Sea of Galilee are located in the area given to the children of Naphtali

The reference to multiplying the nations and increasing their joy could refer to the time in which we live today. The gospel of Jesus Christ was to be taken beyond the nation of Israel. We have certainly seen nations multiply and those who do turn to Him find joy.

All these things were and are related to the birth of a Child. In verse 6, Isaiah wrote, For unto us a Child is born, to us a Son is given. This is our cue to jump ahead some 800 years, to the time when that Child was to be born. We come to a land no longer flowing with milk and honey, to a land where many people worked hard to earn a meager existence. We come to a time that had an uncertain peace, where the known world was under the control of Rome and human life was of little value unless you were a Roman. Let's make our way to a small town about 15 miles due west of the southern tip of the Sea of Galilee, its name is Nazareth. It's a typical country town, with typical people with all the typical things happening in it. Well, not quite! In fact, there is something very strange going on. Let's read about it in Luke's account.

Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And having come in, the angel said to her, "Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women!" But when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and considered what manner of greeting this was. Then 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 bring forth a Son, and shall call His name JESUS. (Luke 1:26-31)

The phrase "in the sixth month" refers to another significant event Luke recorded earlier in this first chapter. Six months earlier Zachariah, the father of John the Baptist had a visit from Gabriel. He was told he and his wife Elisabeth would have a son in their old age. Since Elisabeth was past

child-bearing age this was an exceptional but not unique situation. It had happened to others (Sarah the wife of Abraham and Hannah, Samuel's mother). But, what was to happen to Mary was unique, it had never happened to anyone before and it was to never happen again.

It is certainly not an everyday occurrence for people to be visited by an angel. However, the events surrounding the birth of Jesus were so significant they could not be left to chance. These visits of the angel Gabriel to Zachariah and Mary were for the purpose of communicating to them their involvement in **the** most significant happening since the creation. Sometimes we get so busy with the routine things of life we fail to listen when God has a message for us. However, when Gabriel came to Mary, there was no way she was going to fail to listen. He had her complete attention.

Mary was a teenager, a young woman. She was looking forward to her marriage to Joseph, the carpenter. They were engaged, and in those days, engagements were binding commitments. Even though the marriage was not consummated during the engagement period, to undo this commitment was like getting a divorce. Luke was careful to point out that Mary was a virgin. This reference supports additional prophecy in Isaiah 7:14 (*Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son and shall call his name Immanuel.*) There is great significance (beyond the obvious) of the virgin birth. Consider the fact that mankind was enslaved to this world system whose ruler is Satan. When Adam choose to obey Satan rather than God, he lost his dominion over creation in the same way that the possessions of a slave become the property of the slave-owner. All the children of the slave become the property of the slave-owner and slaves nor their children have any rights – they are property. If Jesus had been born of the seed of Adam, then He too would have been subject to Satan. However, being born of the Holy Spirit, He was of a different origin and, additionally, if He refused to serve Satan (that is, commit sin), then He would not be under the penalty of sin nor the dominion of Satan. Consequently, His virgin birth and sinless life are two very important principles. If Jesus was born of a virgin, then He could **not** be of the seed of Adam.

Both Mary and Joseph traced their ancestry back to David. The promises God made to David concerning his kingdom and reign will one day find fulfillment in this Child of Mary. Of earthly lineage, He is heir to the throne of Israel. Of spiritual lineage, He is heir to the throne of the universe.

Turning to the announcement Gabriel made to Mary, he said, *"Hail, thou that are highly favored, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women."* God's grace had been bestowed upon Mary in that she had been selected (chosen) to bear the Son of God. The grace is there because God is

there. Gabriel said "the Lord is with thee." I wonder if we, today, realize how highly favored we are in that God has chosen to be with us through His Holy Spirit. Truly, blessed are we among all people, if we know the Lord.

You can imagine Mary was frightened and confused by this greeting. Just seeing an angel could be pretty upsetting. I'm sure she wondered, "who is this and what does this mean?" Gabriel told her to not be afraid. Almost every appearance of angels recorded in the Bible is accompanied by a word of reassurance to not be afraid. When we get close to the spiritual world and make contact in such a manner as is described here, then the element of the unknown and our own lack of power work together to produce fear. If fear has its way, then we are reluctant to step out in faith to experience all God has for us in Christ Jesus in our Christian walk. Consequently, many Christians are living in spiritual poverty though they are heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ. "Fear not," he said, "you have found favor with God." What a message!

How was this favor to manifest itself? Mary was told she was to become pregnant and have a son whom she was to name, Jesus. So far, this all sounds fairly reasonable to Mary. After all, she was planning to marry Joseph and they would want to have children and every Jewish family wanted sons and Jesus was not an uncommon name in that area.

But the angel did not stop there, he had something else to say.

"He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. "And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end." (Luke 1:32-33)

This baby that Mary was told about was NOT going to be an ordinary person. He was going to be a great person. What is involved in being a great person? Perhaps we can learn from what this great Person taught. Remember Jesus taught His disciples that if any would be great among them, then they should be the servant of all. Even today, we recognize true greatness by this measure: there are the Mother Teresas, the Albert Schweitzers, there are those in our community whom you know of who would qualify for greatness. Jesus was to be great for another reason and that was simply because of Who He is: "Son of the Highest" identifies this person with the Lord God of the universe, the Creator of heaven and earth. Greatness is also inherent in His commission to reign as King over the house of Jacob. He will be a King from the lineage of David. Ever since David was king, every other king was compared to David and none of them measured up to David. In this coming king, He will surpass anything David even dreamed of accomplishing. His Kingdom will never ever end.

By this time, Mary has figured out the angel is not talking about a

normal course of events. This is not something that is to “just happen” after she and Joseph have been married awhile. Something special was going to take place. Mary was apparently pretty calm, at least she was thinking straight enough to ask a very important question. Let’s look at her question and the answer the angel gave.

Then Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I do not know a man?" And the angel answered and said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God. "Now indeed, Elizabeth your relative has also conceived a son in her old age; and this is now the sixth month for her who was called barren. "For with God nothing will be impossible." Then Mary said, "Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her. (Luke 1:34-38)

Mary’s question of “How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?” is her own testimony to the fact that she was a virgin. Gabriel’s answer attributed the means of accomplishing this miraculous event to the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God is the agent for action. Because God’s Spirit was the Initiator and Source of the life of this holy person that was to be born, he would be called the Son of God. Previously, Gabriel said He would be called the Son of the Highest. I think it would be helpful for us to return to the passage in Isaiah we read earlier and now look at the names Isaiah mentioned. There are four titles in Isaiah 9:6: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Prince of Peace, and Everlasting Father. If we add to these names the titles the angel gave, Son of God and Son of the Highest, and consider the name Jesus means “Jehovah is salvation”, then we have a good word picture of this Miracle Child.

We can look back on the earthly ministry of Jesus and see how He lived up to those titles. [Wonderful Counselor] If we study the Sermon on the Mount, we see it is a textbook of counseling material. Many people today spend great sums of their resources going to counselors to get help for themselves to straighten out their lives. In many cases the problems they are experiencing would disappear if they would apply the counsel of Jesus as given in the Sermon on the Mount. [Mighty God] When we examine the miracles and mighty works Jesus did, we conclude that the might and power of God was with Him. [Everlasting Father] Taking His own testimony of “I and My Father are One,” we see He not only had the power of God, He was, in fact, God Himself. [Son of God] If we realize that the term “son” can mean “another expression of the same person,” then we can pick up another name from the 7th chapter of Isaiah, Immanuel, which literally means “God with us.” As we apply these titles to Jesus, we see, even though we have difficulty understanding it, not only is He the Son of God, He is God Himself, come in the flesh.

The title Prince of Peace finds application in at least two dimensions. First, we obtain "peace with God" through the work of the cross which Jesus came to accomplish. Because of man's sinful nature he was at odds with God. There was separation between God and man. Man did not and does not have the ability to bridge the gap; therefore, God took the action to close that gap to make us "at one" with Him. This is peace with God. This action is a demonstration of the meaning of the name Jesus, "Jehovah is salvation." You may remember that an angel later made a visit to Joseph in a dream and told him, "You shall call His name Jesus, for it is He who will save His people from their sins." Once we have experienced this peace with God and accept His Lordship in our lives, we then have the freedom to practice the principles of the Kingdom of God. Living out our salvation in the everydayness of life then will bring to us a condition of inner peace which spills over into our relationships with others. This aspect is what I believe is meant by the term "peace of God." This is the second dimension of this title Prince of Peace that works to bless us who have the Lord Jesus in our lives. [Son of the Highest] In His resurrection from death, Jesus was shown to be Lord of all things. [Jehovah is Salvation] The work of the Cross was the means by which He brought salvation to mankind.

Gabriel had more news for Mary and that concerned the extraordinary thing that had happen to Zachariah and Elisabeth. This was of significance as related to the news Mary had just received about herself. It communicated to Mary that what was happening to her was a part of a series of events of cosmic significance. I think God realized there would be those who would try to discount the ministry of both John the Baptist and Jesus as being nothing out of the ordinary, so He chose to do the impossible from man's point of view. A barren woman past the age of child bearing having a child and then a virgin having a child. If one impossibility was not enough to convince them, then perhaps two would work. With God, nothing is impossible.

Mary's response is beautiful. It was total and complete surrender. When she called herself a "hand maid" she was using the term that meant a "female slave". In that society, the owner of the slave had complete authority over the slave. Mary was willing to be that surrendered to God.

God wants each of us to have that kind of devotion and commitment to Him. As we surrender to Him in the same attitude that Mary did, we will find that what happened to Mary in the physical will happen to us in the spiritual. Physically, Christ was conceived and grew in her. Spiritually, Christ is conceived in us by the Holy Spirit when we experience being born from above. If you have never truly surrendered your life to God through Jesus, then invite Him to come and take control and be Lord of your life.

CHAPTER 2

THE BIRTH OF JESUS

The more we study the word of God, the clearer it becomes how inter-related the Scriptures are to each other. We see in this inter-relatedness evidence of divine authorship and evidence of a "plan." Many Old Testament Scriptures find their fulfillment in the coming of the Messiah. As we see prophetic truths that have already come to pass centuries after they were first recorded, our faith is made stronger to look forward to things that have not yet happened. In relationship to the birth of Jesus, passages from Isaiah 11:1-5 and Micah 5:2 are related to Matthew 1:18-25 and Luke 2:1-7.

There shall come forth a Rod from the stem of Jesse, And a Branch shall grow out of his roots. The Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon Him, The Spirit of wisdom and understanding, The Spirit of counsel and might, The Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD. His delight is in the fear of the LORD, And He shall not judge by the sight of His eyes, Nor decide by the hearing of His ears; But with righteousness He shall judge the poor, And decide with equity for the meek of the earth; He shall strike the earth with the rod of His mouth, And with the breath of His lips He shall slay the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt of His loins, And faithfulness the belt of His waist. (Isaiah 11:1-5)

We see a reference to Jesse, the father of King David. It has been suggested that the prophecy was stated this way so that we would associate the Messiah that was to be born with the humble home of this family in Bethlehem, rather than with the stately mansions of Jerusalem where David reigned as king. Here the Messiah is referred to as a "Shoot" or "Branch" coming from the same family that produced the Davidic line of kings. In Rev. 5:5 we find reference to Jesus as being the Root of David – meaning the Source. In Rev. 22:15 we again find reference to Jesus as being, not only the Root but also the Offspring of David. This speaks to me, that not only is God our Beginning, He is also our Outcome – that Christ is All and in all. He is the Alpha and the Omega. Not only is He the raw material for our spiritual lives. He is also the outcome of our Christian walk.

The reference to the Spirit of the Lord in this passage from Isaiah refers not so much to the activity of the Spirit in the events related to the birth of the Savior, but more so to His ministry. He was born of the Spirit of God from His physical birth; however, the Holy Spirit was also involved in a significant event at the time Jesus was baptized by John. At that time the Holy Spirit descended and rested upon Him which signaled the start of His

miraculous ministry. I think that we today could learn from the experience that Jesus had. Not only did He have the Spirit of God because He was born of the Spirit, but also He was endowed with the Spirit in a special way for His public ministry. If Jesus needed both, then so do we.

We see in verse 2 of chapter 11, a naming of the sevenfold Spirits of God that are mentioned in Revelation 5:6. This passage from Isaiah is really broad in its scope in that we find reference to the earthly parentage of Jesus (Shoot of Jesse), the earthly ministry of Jesus, and then to the earthly reign of Jesus when He will come again to reign as King.

The second Old Testament background reference for this study is found in Micah 5:2.

"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, Though you are little among the thousands of Judah, Yet out of you shall come forth to Me The One to be Ruler in Israel, Whose goings forth are from of old, From everlasting."

This passage shows that the Messiah was to be from the tribe of Judah which is in agreement with the prophetic words spoken by Jacob in his old age. In Genesis 49:10 he said, "The scepter or leadership shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet until Shiloh (the Messiah or the Peaceful One) comes to Whom it belongs, and to Him shall be the obedience of the people." Micah pinpointed the town where the Savior was to be born. Bethlehem was the home town of David and both Mary and Joseph could trace their ancestry back to David. This fact will figure into some of the happenings we will see when we examine the New Testament account. The name Bethlehem literally means House of Bread. Considering the many references that Jesus made to Himself as being the Bread of Life and the meaningful use of the broken bread in the Lord Supper, we see how really well planned was God's means of redeeming lost mankind to Himself. Even the details were taken into account.

Matthew does not mention the account of the announcement covered by Luke, but starts out with the genealogy of Jesus, beginning with Abraham through David and Solomon all the way up to Joseph. This genealogy shows that Joseph was a direct descendant of David through the line of kings of Judah. Many writers have pointed out that Matthew's emphasis shows the sovereignty aspects (the kingship, if you will) of the life of Jesus. On the other hand, Luke tended to emphasize the humanness of Jesus, Mark His servant nature and John, His divinity.

After Matthew completed the ancestry of Jesus, he then moved on in the narrative of the story.

Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: After His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found

with child of the Holy Spirit. (Matt 1:18)

Matthew was careful to include the significant information regarding the timing of Mary's pregnancy relative to her marriage to Joseph. Mary was betrothed to Joseph. Nowadays we have engagements. A betrothal was more of a commitment to marry than we normally consider an engagement to be. However, before the marriage took place or was consummated, Mary became pregnant or as Matthew put it, "was found with child." We know from Luke's account the conception was the work of the Holy Spirit. That is confirmed also by Matthew.

We don't know a lot about Mary and Joseph. There are many traditions relative to Mary that are advocated by the Roman Catholic Church. Some of these have no historical nor Scriptural basis. A good example is the dogma of Immaculate Conception. This dogma refers to the idea that Mary was conceived by her mother in such a manner so as to be free from all taint of original sin. Such an idea is strictly human in origin and has no basis in any Holy Scripture of which I am aware.

On the other hand, there are people who deny that anything miraculous happened relative to the birth of Jesus, that it is nothing more than a myth. Persons who would deny Christ of His virgin birth would also deny His deity and His power to save. That spirit is even now in the world; it is, of course, the spirit of anti-Christ.

We have to wonder how all of this affected Joseph. We are not told exactly when Mary told Joseph what had happened. I would imagine that it would have been much better for her to have shared the fact that an angel had visited her immediately after the visit. Knowing human nature, it probably didn't happen that way. Luke tells us that after the angel's visit, that Mary went into Judah to visit Elisabeth and stayed with her until John was born. By this time she was probably showing signs that she was with child. By waiting until that time to tell Joseph what had happened, he found it very difficult to believe. What did Joseph do?

Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not wanting to make her a public example, was minded to put her away secretly. (Matt 1:19)

Now you can see that not only did God choose Mary because of her character, but He also choose Joseph to be the head of the household where Jesus would grow up because of his character. I'm sure he was very hurt by what he imagined had happened, yet he was a person of noble character and that characteristic along with the love he had for Mary led him to handle the matter discretely. He was determined to end the engagement, but he would do it quietly with as little embarrassment to Mary and himself as possible. However, as Joseph tried to figure out the details of how he would

handle this matter in the most discrete manner he had an unusual experience of his own.

But while he thought about these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. "And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name JESUS, for He will save His people from their sins." (Matt 1:20-21)

Though Joseph was conducting himself in a very noble and just manner, he was about to do something that was not in the plan that God had. So we see God intervening. Joseph had a dream in which the angel of the Lord appeared to him and delivered the same message about the Child that Mary had heard, even to the name to be given to the Child. This was enough to convince him to follow through with the marriage.

I think there is a lesson here for us: We may go about our daily lives doing what is noble and just, and, yet, be in conflict with the will of God. From a human point of view Joseph's intended actions were all one could be expected to do and yet God had a better way. What God wanted from Joseph was beyond the bounds of humanly motivated love but called for the kind of love that only God can inspire. It would need to be a love that was self-sacrificing. You know, that is exactly what God was doing in Christ Jesus. We see a clue to the extent of this love in the words, "He shall save His people from their sins." At the time, Joseph did not know how that was to happen, but we can look back and see that salvation was bought by the blood of Jesus as He died for you and me on the cross of Calvary.

Matthew was very careful to point out how events related to Old Testament prophecy.

So all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying "Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel," which is translated, "God with us." (Matt 1:22-23)

What do you think Joseph did?

Then Joseph, being aroused from sleep, did as the angel of the Lord commanded him and took to him his wife, and did not know her till she had brought forth her firstborn Son. And he called His name JESUS. (Matt 1:24-25)

I suspect that the angel of the Lord made a profound impression on Joseph. The angel told Joseph not to be afraid to take Mary to be his wife and when Joseph waked up he did what the angel told him. He and Mary were officially married and yet Joseph did not consummate the marriage until after the birth of Jesus.

We have been emphasizing the fact that all the events surrounding the birth of Jesus were in accordance with Old Testament prophecies. Mary and Joseph lived in Nazareth and yet the Scriptures clearly stated that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem. I suspect Mary and Joseph did not know what Micah 5:2 said regarding this matter. They were good people but they were not Biblical scholars. So, how was it to happen that Mary will be at the right place at the right time? God had a way. It is recorded in the gospel of Luke.

And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This census first took place while Quirinius was governing Syria. So all went to be registered, everyone to his own city. (Luke 2:1-3)

With God nothing is impossible. The Roman Empire with its high and mighty Caesar was used by God to accomplish the purposes of the Kingdom of God. And they thought that they were in control. Here was Caesar Augustus thinking that he was some sort of god and yet the one true God was coming into the world, not as someone high and mighty, but as a helpless child. You see, even the foolishness of God is wiser than the wisdom of man and the weakness of God is stronger than the strength of man. Caesar thought that he had the idea of registering everyone so that he could tax them. Everyone was to go to their ancestral home towns for this registration. Everyone was to include Joseph and Mary.

Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with child. (LUKE 2:4-5)

As you give and receive Christmas cards this year, you will no doubt see scenes of Mary and Joseph on the road to Bethlehem with Mary riding on a donkey and Joseph leading the donkey. We aren't told in the gospel accounts how they traveled, but you can be assured that it was not in the kind of comfort with which we travel today. The total distance from Nazareth to Bethlehem is about 85 miles and the roads were not in the best condition. After all, this was a poor country and under Roman domination. But even with good roads and even if Mary did have a donkey on which to ride, it would not be an easy trip for her since she was nine months pregnant.

With Joseph and Mary having arrived in Bethlehem nothing stood in the way for the prophecies to be fulfilled.

So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. (Luke 2:6-7)

The Christmas Story

We've all seen Christmas dramas in which Joseph and the obviously pregnant Mary are knocking on the door of the inn only to be turned away. I can remember the anger that I used to have toward the innkeeper for turning them away. After I learned what the inns of that day were like, then I lost my anger and thought maybe he had done them a kindness in letting them use the stable. The inns of that day were usually a large open room where everyone bedded down on the floor. This is what you might call "public accommodations" -- really public. It would not be a fitting place for a woman to have a baby. On the hand, a stable in which animal are kept is not a very fitting place either.

If you visit the land of Israel and go to Bethlehem you will be shown a cave that is supposedly the location where Jesus was born. This remarkable person came into the world in the humblest of conditions and yet He has had more influence on the world than all the Caesars put together. I don't know of anyone that celebrates the birthday of any of the Caesars and yet all the world of that day would have told you that Caesar was the most important person on the earth at that time, that he had more power than anyone. We can look back on that and realize how foolish those concepts were; and yet I wonder today if our perception is any better in our time than those folks had in their time when it comes to realizing what is really important and what has lasting significance.

As we enter into this Christmas season, we have another chance to look beyond the tinsel and the trees, to look beyond the commercialism and the confusion and to look to the real significance of this season of celebration, the birth of Jesus. If our Christmas commemoration is not about Christ Jesus, then we have missed the point completely.

CHAPTER 3

GOOD NEWS OF GREAT JOY

There is a multibillion dollar industry in our country that is engaged in the dissemination of information. Whether we are listening to the radio, watching television, or reading a magazine we are likely to encounter what we normally call "the news." Most of us do not like what we hear or see or read that is "newsworthy" and yet we cannot seem to resist finding out just what is "the latest news." We have all heard comments about the fact that most of the news we hear or read is "bad news." In spite of all the bad news, there is good news, also. In fact, the word "gospel" literally means "good news". As we read the accounts in the New Testament concerning the coming of the Messiah, we can look back to the Old Testament and find passages that have a direct prophetic fulfillment in the birth of the Christ Child. The proclamation of the Good News regarding the coming of the Lord has many prophetic passages that stand out as significant.

We remember passages from the Book of Isaiah that speak directly to the hope and anticipated joy that the coming of the Messiah would bring. There are other references that are of a Good News nature in Isaiah. In 53:4-6 we see reference to the work of the cross – "He has borne our grief and carried our sorrows." In 61:1-3 we see the extent of the impact of the coming of the Messiah and that it is for our good. He would "preach good tidings to the poor; heal the brokenhearted, proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound." He was to do for us what we could not do for ourselves. That is the BEST NEWS of all. This news gives hope and help for an otherwise helpless and hopeless situation.

Luke tells us what happened on that miraculous night in which Jesus was born.

Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid. Then the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. "For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. "And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger." (Luke 2:8-12)

People had raised sheep in this Judean hill country for centuries. Young David shepherded sheep on those hills and learned from them many lesson about the relationship of the shepherd to his sheep and how these lesson applied to God and His care for us. One of the most beautiful pieces

of literature ever written was developed out of David's recognizing the love that God had for him. You are familiar with the 23rd Psalm, where David says, "The Lord is my Shepherd." During David's day, the occupation of being a shepherd was a respected one; however, at the time Jesus was born the people of that area had outgrown their roots, in that now shepherding was looked down on. Shepherds were not in the upper echelons of society. It amazes me that people then, as well as now, tend to judge the worth of a person by his or her occupation. In fact, we even see published results of surveys of public opinion polls of what is considered to be the most respected occupations. What a person does to earn a living has nothing whatsoever to do with the worth of the individual.

The gospel message of hope can be found throughout the Old Testament and we know that this message of hope is associated with an individual, a Person, Who would come onto the scene of history. When the time was right, or as the Bible says. "in the fullness of time," this event happened in the little village of Bethlehem.

All the world needed a Savior, but all in the world didn't realize their need. The kings and emperors, the princes and priest, the governors and rulers, the rich and proud – all these didn't realize their need for a Savior. It is difficult or next to impossible to lead a materially successful and proud person to accept the Lordship of Jesus and to know Him as Savior. I'm sure you have friends who are reasonably successful, they think they are happy, they do pretty much what they want to do and they will tell you that they see no need for the Lord in their lives. I think this is why Jesus taught us that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. God knows our nature. He knew that the message of the birth of the Savior would not be properly received by the so-called "successful" people. Therefore, He sent His angels to those who knew they needed help – those who were not puffed up with pride at their own importance.

The account of the angel's appearance at night gives us some further information regarding angels. Apparently there was a radiance or glow associated with the presence of the angels. This is termed, by Luke, the glory of the Lord. I think it is safe to say that we don't understand all we know about angels and we certainly don't understand this phenomenon. We can read of similar radiance associated with Moses when he came down for the mountain after having been in the presence of God. When Jesus met with Moses and Elijah on the mountain of transfiguration, all three of these were described as "shining." The appearance of the angel is not nearly so important as what he said to the shepherds. "Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people."

This statement of "fear not" carries a message that could easily have

two meanings. The first and most obvious is to not be afraid of the angel. A second meaning of "stop being afraid" is perhaps more significant considering the message that followed. Since we have a Savior, we do not have to live our lives in fear – we can stop being afraid. Fear paralyzes, it causes us to miss out on a lot of living. In the passage mentioned earlier from Isaiah 61, we saw that the Messiah would come "to set the captives free." One of the things from which we can be free is fear. Much of human fear is associated with death and the uncertainty of that situation. Many people are literally afraid to die. These fears are rooted in our Old Nature, the way we were before we were saved. This Old Nature was subject to the power and penalty of sin. The power of sin was such that we could not keep from sinning, the penalty of sin was death. The work of the Savior was such that He redeemed our life from destruction and gave us new life; that is, a New Nature that is not subject to the power of sin. This does not mean that we never miss the mark but it does mean that "sinning" is no longer a way of life for us. And if we do sin, then we know that we can obtain forgiveness because of what our Savior has done for us. The angel said that he had good tidings of great joy in that a Savior had come. We would all agree with the angel, that is good news.

I'm sure the shepherds were wondering how they would know what the angel said was true. The angel anticipated the question by telling them of the way they could know. Verse 12 says "And this... manger." When the shepherds found such an unusual thing, they would then know they had found the Christ Child.

Sometimes you wonder why it was necessary that the Christ should be born in such humble surroundings. There He was in a stable instead of a house, He was lying in a feed trough instead of a crib, and His earthy parents were relatively poor rather than well off materially. I believe that the situations surrounding the birth of Jesus were this humble so that God could demonstrate to us that what we do with our lives is not dependent upon the circumstances into which we are born. Not only does the Savior set us free from fear, He also sets us free from our circumstances.

In one of the many books by Watchman Nee he related a story about "circumstances". One day an older Christian happened on a younger fellow Christian and as everyone is likely to do, asked the question: "How are things going with you?" His friend replied, "Pretty well, under the circumstances." The older man asked, "What are you doing down there?" "Down where?" asked his friend. "Down under the circumstances, we should be on top of the circumstances." Yet, all of us know of situations where people use their circumstances as an excuse for all manner of evil in their lives. A lot of the sociologists try to tell us that the reason for all the crime in the inner cities is because of the environment (circumstances) that the people are in. When we stand before the judgment seat of Christ, that

excuse is not going to hold up. He has been there, He knows the humblest of circumstances.

After the message was delivered by the angel, more marvelous things happened.

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: "Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!" (Luke 2:13-14)

Surely, God is to be praised for what He has done. In sending a Savior into the world that had rebelled against Him, He showed the kind of unique love that He has for mankind. The praise the heavenly host gave was quite simple and yet so meaningful. "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men." The highest praise and adoration that we have or can imagine should be offered to this loving Father God. As we approach life with this as our highest priority, then we find that we must move SELF out of the number one position. As we do that, we will find that our relationships with others will be greatly improved. If this approach would grow and spread to those around us, then truly there would be PEACE on earth and GOOD WILL toward men.

After such a happening as this, it would be hard to imagine that the shepherds would simply go back to tending their sheep without doing something. Let's see what they did.

So it was, when the angels had gone away from them into heaven, that the shepherds said to one another, "Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us." And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger. Now when they had seen Him, they made widely known the saying which was told them concerning this Child. And all those who heard it marveled at those things which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart. Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told them. (Luke 2:15-20)

The shepherds decided among themselves to go check this out. They wanted to see for themselves. Their response was predictable. Here was something that was for **their** good and they wanted to experience all of it that they could. The response they made took some effort in that they had to go into Bethlehem. The response also involved some risk in that they left their sheep to go see this thing which had come to pass. The effort and the risk were worth the benefit they experienced. As Luke's account relates, they returned glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen. We would have been amazed if the shepherds had just

ignored the whole thing. I'm sure that God is dismayed and disappointed with people who, since that time, have ignored and rejected the good news that a Savior has come and that they can know and experience salvation by responding to the message. It may take some effort to learn more about what they have heard. It may involve some risk to follow Christ. But all who do will tell you that it is well worth the risk, because with Jesus, even in losing, you win.

The shepherds were not disappointed. They found the situation to be exactly as the angel had told them. They found Mary and Joseph and the Child.

We are not given the details of the visit to the stable; however, you have to believe that they admired the Child, they may have even knelt in worship. You just know that they told Mary and Joseph about the angels that they had seen. This must have encouraged Mary and Joseph. There they were in less than ideal conditions, 85 miles away from home, there was no one to help with the birth, they were stuck off in a stable. They may have wondered if God cared about what was happening. Had He forgotten and was not aware of what they were going through? The shepherds then came with their story and this, I sure, gave Mary and Joseph encouragement that God and all the angel of heaven were not only aware, but also were watching over them. Are we aware of God's caring for us today?

Luke tells us that Mary kept all these things in her heart and pondered them. A lot had happened in her life during the last year. There were other things to come that would impact her life because of this relationship in which she found herself. So it should be with us. When Christ is in our lives there will be an impact and we will be influenced by His presence. Sometimes it takes a lot of "pondering" things to try to make sense of all the things that happen in our lives.

But let's get back to the shepherds. After they had seen for themselves and had experienced the facts, they told others what had been told to them about the Christ Child. They had what it takes to be a good witness of the gospel. Not only must we hear, we must also believe enough to take steps of faith to experience the truth of the gospel. Only then are we able to properly witness. The shepherd would likely share their experience and the message for as long as they lived. So it should be with us who have accepted Jesus as Lord and have experienced the new birth. We should share it with others as long as we live. We would be amazed if the shepherds did not tell everyone with whom they came in contact. Yet, so many of us who have been saved never bother to tell anyone else about it.

There are some significant truths in the events of this story that we can relate to this 21st century.

The Christmas Story

1. The good news will be proclaimed either by angels or by men.
2. Those that hear the good news can check it out.
3. Those that do check it out will find it to be true.
4. Once we have determined the validity of the gospel, we are compelled to share it with others.
5. Everyone who hears the message will react to it. They will either accept it or reject it.
6. The truth that we have a Savior continues to be good news to those that realize their need of Him.

Let this season of Christmas be a reason to either initiate or strengthen a life changing experience with Jesus.

CHAPTER 4 RESPONDING TO GOOD NEWS

Many times when something of major significance happens, various people will react in completely different ways to the news. What is perceived as benefit by one group may be viewed as a liability by another. The news about the birth of the Messiah was welcomed by some and offensive to others. In some cases the news about the Messiah was announced by angels and in another the information source was a group from a different culture and another religion. As we look at the story about the Magi and the star they followed, we find a scattering of passages in the Old Testament that might be related.

In the last days, the mountain of the house of the Lord will be established as the chief of the mountains, and will be raised above the hills; and all the nations will stream to it. And many peoples will come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that He may teach us concerning His ways, and that we may walk in His paths," (Isaiah 2:2-3)

The term "nations" refers to the Gentiles and we see the initial coming of the Gentiles in these Wise Men. This prophecy will find its ultimate fulfillment in the millennial reign of Jesus during His Second Advent. During the earthly ministry of Jesus some Gentiles came seeking Jesus. They told Philip, "We would see Jesus." When Philip told Jesus they wanted to see Him, it seemed to have marked a turning point. It was almost as if this were a signal for Him, because immediately after that, Jesus said "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified."

In Numbers 24:17 there is an obscure reference to a star. It says, "I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near; A star shall come forth from Jacob." Of course this "star" refers to a person. In this case it was a person whose coming was marked by a special star-like phenomenon in the sky.

Finally, in Isaiah 60:3, we see, "Nations shall come to Thy light and kings to the brightness of Thy rising." This passage takes the concepts we saw in the earlier passage of the Gentiles participating in the salvation that God was providing for the world and combines it with the reference to the astronomical happening of a star appearing. Perhaps this is where we get the idea that the so-called wise men were kings.

Let's examine what Matthew says about these visitors.

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying,

"Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him." (Matthew 2:1-2)

The word translated "wise men" in the Greek is "magi". It is the root of our English word magician. These men were astrologers and fortunetellers. What they practiced was strictly forbidden by God and these people would not have been considered, by the Jews, to be religiously worthy to have had any part in the coming of the Messiah. It was almost as if God were trying to send a message to the Jews, that the coming of the Messiah was obvious even to the heathen who had enough curiosity to be concerned about such things. The people of Israel, therefore, had no excuse. The Jews had gotten caught up in religious practice rather than righteous living and daily communion with God. The leaders were not looking for the Messiah to come. In fact, they did not want Him because they did not know Him. There is a danger for us today to be so caught up in the busy-ness of church activities that we completely miss the righteousness, peace, and joy of the Kingdom of God. We can fool ourselves into thinking that it is participation in programs that pleases God and miss the fact that He requires that we "do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with Him."

From where did these Wise Men come? It is speculated that the magi came from the area of Babylon. Considering that the Jews had spent 70 years in captivity in Babylon, it would make sense that the people of that area would have had access to the Hebrew writings. Of course, the Old Testament writings do contain numerous references to the coming of the Messiah. Babylon is thought to be the birthplace of many of the mystical religions. These pagan mystical religious organizations tend to adopt forms of other religions. This is nothing more than a mask that they put on to disguise the fact that they are involved in heathen religious practices. Amazingly, many professing Christians belong to such organizations.

Why do you think they went to Jerusalem? Normally, you would expect a king to be born in the capital city. Jerusalem had been the seat of government since the reign of David. Therefore, it is not surprising to have the Wise Men show up in Jerusalem. However, God does not have the same value system that most people have. He chooses the humble rather than the proud; the simple rather than the complex; and the weak rather than the strong. I would imagine the Wise Men were rather surprised that no one there was aware of what was happening. They probably expected to find people jubilant and rejoicing that the long awaited Messiah had born. But what did they find? Business as usual. We are told that when Jesus comes back the second time, that it will be same way: business as usual.

When they started asking questions, things quickly changed from the usual to the unusual.

When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem

with him. And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. So they said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it is written by the prophet: `But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, Are not the least among the rulers of Judah; For out of you shall come a Ruler Who will shepherd My people Israel.'" Then Herod, when he had secretly called the wise men, determined from them what time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the young Child, and when you have found Him, bring back word to me, that I may come and worship Him also."
(Matthew 2:3-8)

Herod saw an immediate threat to his position of power. He was not a very popular person. He was ruthless and did anything he had to do in order to stay in power. Any perceived threat to his authority was crushed with excessive force. He even had his wife and several of his sons put to death. He was a maniac and when he became disturbed, those around him also became disturbed because he was unpredictable; he was liable to do anything. Herod was not the first nor the last in the history of the world to be corrupted with power. There is a saying that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. We frequently read about public officials that misuse their positions of trust. It is my guess that this practice is more often the case than not. I know there are situations in the business world where people in positions of authority use such positions to try to manipulate and control others or else they use such positions for the sole purpose of getting themselves promoted to their next job. Whether in the public arena or the business world such insecure little people become obsessed with their power and become maniacal, like mad men, in their protection of what they have and their pursuit of more power. In the process they make life miserable for themselves and everyone around them. Whether it is the Hitlers and Stalin of our time or the Caesars and Alexanders of antiquity that cause global chaos or even Herod of Judaea who had the babies of Bethlehem murdered, we can be assured that those who pursue selfish interests cause suffering of the innocent. This is held up in stark contrast to the way that Jesus would show us. The way of self sacrifice. The way of putting others first.

Anybody who was likely to know anything about the coming of the Messiah was summonsed to a meeting. The chief priest and the scribes would be the most likely to know. Herod demanded to know where the Christ was to be born. Interestingly enough, someone knew the prophecy that was given by Micah that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem of Judaea. Even though these religious leaders knew what the Scriptures said, just the knowledge was not enough for them to do something about it. Because what they learned was not mixed with faith it did them no good. The writer of the Book of Hebrews, in reference to the Children of Israel who

died in the wilderness, said, "For indeed we have had good news preached to us, just as they also; but the word they heard did not profit them, because it was not united by faith in those who heard." (Heb. 4:2) There are people who go to church week after week and hear the word preached, perhaps, they even read their Bible regularly; and yet, their lives are not changed simply because the knowledge is not mixed with faith.

There is no evidence that Herod doubted the truth of the Scriptures regarding the prophecy. He believed it. However, we know that his response was that of rebellion. Outwardly, he put on a show for the visitors from the East. He called them in and wanted to know more of the details. "When did the star appear?" He sent them on to Bethlehem with instruction to find the Child and bring word back to him. He lied when he said that he wanted to worship Him. I guess Herod is typical of the tyrant that is in each one of us. Each one of us has a little tyrant, it is named SELF. Self is ruthless so that Self can have Self's way. Usually, Self will stop at nothing to protect Self's reign. Self will even lie and pretend to practice religion to avoid yielding to the rule of the Newborn King. God is not fooled by such actions. Herod had fooled the Magi, but he had not fooled God. You know it is possible today for us to be good "church goers" and apparently have many people fooled; however, we can be as phony as a three dollar bill. If we have never accepted and yielded to the Lordship of Jesus, then we are still carnal and not spiritual. Self is still on the throne rather than Christ. Paul tells us that flesh and blood shall not inherit the Kingdom of God. Therefore, it is necessary to put Self to death so that Christ can reign as Lord in our lives. This has to be a daily experience – actually it is a moment-to-moment experience, a situation by situation experience. You see, every situation we run upon in life is like a fork in the road of life. As we come to the fork in the road or the crossroads in our walk we have to choose which way we will go. Will we go the way of Self or the way of Christ. This is a choice that only we can make for ourselves.

Apparently, it is possible to know enough to verbally direct others to Christ and still be lost ourselves. This was Herod's situation. Based on what he was told by others, he pointed the Magi to the Messiah, and yet he was lost. Jesus spoke of this kind of situation relative to people who might call Him Lord but do not practice the Lordship of Christ. He said, "Not everyone that saith unto me, 'Lord, Lord' shall enter into the Kingdom of heaven, but those that do the will of My Father who is in Heaven."

The visitors from the East had no way of knowing the hidden agenda that Herod had. They received the instructions from Herod and were anxious to be on their way.

When they heard the king, they departed; and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood

over where the young Child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy. (Matthew 2:9-10)

Matthew does not tell us that the Wise Men went to Bethlehem. He does tell us that when they left Jerusalem, they followed the star. There is a good possibility that the star lead them to Nazareth rather than Bethlehem. According to Luke 2:39, after Mary and Joseph had taken Jesus to Jerusalem for the presentation and to offer sacrifices that when they had performed everything according to the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own city of Nazareth. That event was approximately eight days after the birth of the Child. Luke does not mention the coming of the Wise Men, the flight into Egypt, the slaughter of the children and the return from Egypt. We can't tell from the narrative if all this happen before or after they returned to Nazareth.

Regardless of where they were, the Magi found them.

And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Then, being divinely warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed for their own country another way. (Matthew 2:11-12)

The Magi recognized that this Child was special. They called Him the king of the Jews. However, I doubt that they realized He was God incarnate. When Matthew tells us that they worshipped Him, it is likely that they did homage to Him in the same way they would bow down to any other king. They brought expensive gifts because one did not visit someone of superior rank without taking a gift. It was not polite. The gifts were gold, frankincense, and myrrh. There have been attempts to interpret the meaning of the various gifts.

According to tradition, gold symbolizes the kingship of Jesus. By His physical ancestry, Jesus is heir to the throne of Israel through the line of David. By His spiritual heritage He is heir to the throne of the universe. It has been the tradition of kings to accumulate wealth. Gold, for most people, represents the ultimate in wealth. It is ironic that this King did not accumulate earthly wealth. He also cautioned others to avoid falling into the trap of materialism. He taught, "Lay not up for yourselves, treasures on earth; but lay up for yourselves treasure in heaven, for where your treasure is there will your heart be also."

The second gift was frankincense. It is a white aromatic gum resin that exudes from Boswellia trees. It was used in worship and was one of the four ingredients of the holy oil used for anointing priests. It was also burned as incense and frankincense was placed pure on the shewbread in the

Temple. It is thought that this gift was included because it symbolized the worship that would be offered to the Lord Jesus.

The third gift was myrrh. Myrrh is a low growing bush like tree. Both the bark and the wood emit a strong odor. The gum of this tree or bush is also one of the ingredients of the holy anointing oil. It was prized as a perfume and was brought along with aloes for embalming the body of Christ. The myrrh, therefore, is thought to symbolize the atoning death of Jesus, when He gave His life so that we might live.

In looking back on this incident, we wonder: Did these visitors seek the Christ Child because they were wise; or, were they wise because they sought Him? Seeking the Lord is the only route to wisdom. Of course, our greatest and noblest search is for God and His will for our lives. We may seek for God for different motives. Some may seek to escape hell; others make seek God for the sake of family or even hoping for material success. The highest motive is none of these, but is simply that we seek Him because of Who He is. That we may know Him and worship Him. In so doing we will be influenced in our living as we interact with others. Our priorities will change and self-sacrificing love will the theme of our lives.

Post-Script

We have looked at the event through the eyes of various participants and have seen how each person or group of persons responded. We saw that Mary was surrendered, Joseph was obedient, the Shepherds were overflowing with joy and praise, and the Wise Men responded with worship by giving extravagant gifts. I believe that each of us can learn from these people so that our response to God will be improved. He wants us to be surrendered to Himself, to be obedient to His word, to be filled with joy at the realization of His extravagant love for us and then for us to respond with worship of Him.

THE CHRISTMAS STORY

A COLLECTION OF SCRIPTURES WITH
COMMENTARY RELATED TO THE BIRTH OF OUR SAVIOR THAT SEEKS TO SHOW HOW GOD
WORKS IN THE LIVES OF PEOPLE.

SINCE THE TRUTHS OF THE BIBLE ARE ETERNAL, THE APPLICATION OF THE LESSONS ARE FOR
PEOPLE OF ALL TIME AND EVERYWHERE.