

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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Christmas Series 2017: Christmas - The actual event

We are going to look at the actual events recorded in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke connected with the birth of Jesus. These events show to us the ways in which God moved in power to bring His Son, Jesus Christ, into this world.

Luke tells us in the first chapter of his Gospel about the visit of the angel Gabriel to Nazareth to a young virgin called Mary who was betrothed, or engaged to, a man called Joseph, a descendent of David (see Luke 1:26-38).

Mary was, not surprisingly, troubled by the appearance of Gabriel but he quells her fear and explains that she would have a son and He was to be called Jesus, which means Saviour. Then Gabriel speaks of the greatness of Jesus: *"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).

Mary, however, does have a question: *"How can this be, since I do not know a man?"* (Luke 1:34). This was an intelligent question given a virgin had never had a child before. Gabriel answers Mary's question, *"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"* (Luke 1:35).

Mary, in a simple and almost childlike unquestioning way, accepts God's promise: *"Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her* (Luke 1:38).

The story is unfolded further in Matthew 1:18-24. This passage begins, *"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"* (Matthew 1:18).

Mary's pregnancy caused Joseph considerable concern and Matthew gives us a real insight into the kind of man Joseph was, *"Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not wanting to make her a public example, was minded to put her away secretly. 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'"* (Matthew 1:19-20).

Matthew describes Joseph as a loving and considerate man who thought carefully about the welfare of the woman he loved. He wanted to act in just and discreet way and not make her the centre of a scandal. It was whilst he considered the best way to do this God intervenes through a dream. You might ask why didn't God tell Joseph in the first place and save him the anxiety.

I think God wanted us to understand the gentle and caring nature of Joseph and demonstrate the character of the godly man He had chosen to be the guardian of Jesus Christ. He also shows us that Joseph was a man of faith and ready to act in obedience to God once he understood the true nature of the circumstances.

So often at Christmas, we can focus on Mary, the shepherds and the wise men but forget the quiet, protective man of faith who oversaw the welfare of the Son of God from before His birth until He became the young adult who was known as the carpenter's son (see Matthew 13:55).

Joseph is told, *"And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name JESUS, for He will save His people from their sins." 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'"* (Matthew 1:21-23).

He immediately responds to the angel's message in complete faith, *"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"* (Matthew 1:24-25).

Joseph believed implicitly that the child to be born was the Saviour of the world, in fulfilment of the prophecy in Isaiah 7:14. He obeyed without question what he was asked to do and took Mary to be his wife and ensured she and her unborn child were cared for and protected over the coming years. He did this by living a simple life and doing an ordinary job. Joseph teaches us not by what he says but what he does in faith. God ensured that the person charged with being the guardian of His Son was marked by simple faith and obedience. This also teaches us how deeply God values these attributes in the everyday lives of His people.

So the scene is set for the birth of Jesus Christ and Luke unfolds the subsequent events in the second chapter of his Gospel.

The very first Christmas was an extremely busy time because the whole world was involved in a great event ordered by the most powerful man in the world - Caesar Augustus (see Luke 2:1-4). This great Roman emperor had decided to do a census of his world empire. To complete this task he had ordered everyone to move back to the places where they were born. Even now it is extraordinary to think that one man had such control over the world.

But it is only when you read the Bible that you discover it was not the power of an emperor, however great, but the power of God, which was at work. Christmas is all about God, not man, acting on the stage of this world. God had intervened in the lives of Zachariah and Elizabeth to give them a child, John the Baptist, when it seemed impossible they would have a child (see Luke 1:5-25). Then he intervened in Mary's life to tell her she would give birth, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to the Messiah - Jesus (see Luke 1:26-38). Afterwards He intervened in the life of Joseph to ensure this godly man of faith protected Mary and her unborn child on that busy journey to Bethlehem (see Luke 2:4-5). He intervened to use the power of the Roman Empire to move the peoples of the world to ensure His Son, Jesus Christ, would be born in Bethlehem, King David's town, as He had promised in Micah 5:2.

In the Old Testament, God had shown His displeasure towards great kings who were overcome by pride in their kingdoms. God had to discipline David for counting the people of Israel. God humbled great Nebuchadnezzar, who gloried over the Babylon he had built, until he exclaimed, *"I blessed the Most High and praised and honoured Him who lives forever"* (Daniel 4:34). His descendant Belshazzar took the vessels of the temple and drank from them at his feast and praised the gods of gold and silver. In judgment God wrote on the wall a message which Daniel later interpreted, *"God has numbered your kingdom, and finished it; You have been weighed in the balances, and found wanting; Your kingdom has been divided, and given to the Medes and Persians"* (see Daniel 5:24-28). Notice the words, *"God has numbered your kingdom..."* All kingdoms and governments are ultimately responsible to God for the ways in which they administer the power given to them by Him. The first Christmas is a reminder that, in the words of Nebuchadnezzar, *"the Most High rules in the kingdom of men"* (see Daniel 4:17, Daniel 4:25, Daniel 4:32 and Daniel 5:21).

My grandmother used to tell us as children that when it thundered God was moving the furniture! It is certainly true that God moves in the world He created. He does act in great and powerful ways but He often intervenes in quiet and unseen ways. Silently but still with great power His will is being fulfilled. Sometimes He uses the great powers of the world. He used the Assyrians and Babylonians to enslave Israel because of their idolatry but then used the Persians to bring His people back to the land and to rebuild the temple and the city of Jerusalem. He used a great fish to capture Jonah's attention (see Jonah 1:17-2:10) and then a tiny worm to teach him about compassion (see Jonah 4:1-11).

At the first Christmas God used extraordinary power to bring Joseph and Mary into Bethlehem but then He allows Jesus to be born in a stable because there was no room in the inn (Luke 2:7). In Christ we see the power of an almighty God and the reality of His lowliness. That first Christmas night, whilst so many were returning to the warmth of homes and families, Christ was being born homeless. Homelessness was something Jesus experienced at His birth. During His ministry He could say, *"the foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head"* (see Matthew 8:20, Luke 9:58). And, in death, He was laid in another man's tomb (see Matthew 27:57-60, Luke 23:50-53). God's love entered the world by enormous power but that same love was demonstrated through the poverty of Jesus Christ. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 8:9, *"You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich."*

But, at Christmas, God did not only move earth, He also moved heaven. The only witnesses to the birth of Christ, as far we know, were Mary and Joseph.

They alone experienced the coming of the Son of God, as a baby, into the world He had made as God. Just like today, people carried on with their lives unaware of this one great moment of history. There was no one to herald the coming of the *"KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS"* (see Revelation 19:16). So God, who had the power to control Caesar's decisions to move the peoples of the world, now moves heaven. He was not going to allow the birth of His Son to go unnoticed. He sent angels to announce the birth of Jesus. He may have used the greatest ruler on earth to

ensure that the incarnation fulfilled His ancient promises, but He does not tell princes, kings or even priests that Jesus had been born. No, He tells the local shepherds (see Luke 2:8-20), who as a result become the first worshippers of the Good Shepherd (see John 10:11, 14).

When I first saw the "Shepherds Fields" just outside Bethlehem, I must confess, I was disappointed. They were so ordinary. I'm not sure what I expected. But ordinary is what I got. They were not much different to the stony fields with scattered sheep I knew of on the Pennine Hills in Lancashire where I used to live. Yet, to such an ordinary place the angels came. The world had not the least knowledge or understanding of Who was born that night in the city of David but the heavenly host of angels knew and they were full of praise (see Luke 2:14).

The angels challenge our hearts. In a world where Christ is still left out of Christmas what are we doing to convey the wonder of God's love to this world through the incarnation? Like the angels, we should be filled with wonder as we consider God's glory, love, grace and peace. How sad that an event so astonishing can be stripped of all its meaning and replaced by excess. Christmas is about the power and reality of Christ entering into a world full of need. Need which only He could, and still can, meet. Christ is still outside of the world's thinking. It is for us to relay the fact that Christ is still the answer to man's need.

It is in keeping with the character of God that He reveals Himself to those who are lowly. God's relationship with shepherds is a long one. Abel (Genesis 4:2), Abraham (Genesis 12:14-16), Isaac, Jacob (Genesis 29:1), Moses and David (1 Samuel 16:10-11) were all shepherds. These men learned the principles of caring for God's people through the loneliness and discipline of caring for flocks of simple animals.

Jacob could talk about the "*God who shepherded me all the days of my life*" (Genesis 48:15). David sang, "*The LORD is my shepherd*" (Psalm 23:1). The Lord Jesus at the end of John's Gospel asks Peter to "*shepherd [His] sheep*" (John 21:15-19) and as an old man Peter writes to his fellow elders, "*Shepherd the flock of God which is among you*" (1 Peter 5:2). It is not surprising, then, that on the night the Good Shepherd was born, God told the Bethlehem shepherds about His birth.

The message the shepherds received is an enlightening one. It was "*glad tidings of great joy*" (Luke 2:10) because the "*Saviour of the world*" (see John 4:42, 1 John 4:14) had been born. God was no longer speaking and acting from a distance. He was now in the world He created and with the people He loved.

Hebrews 1:1-4 explains that, in times past, God had spoken through the prophets but now He spoke by His Son. In Philippians 2:5-11 we read that Jesus, "*made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men.*" The wonder of that first Christmas night was not that God moved earth and heaven but that He moved Himself.

As I said earlier, we could not move towards Him, in terms of working out our own salvation, but in grace and love He stepped out of eternity into time to save us. That is the wonder of Christ's immaculate birth. He was born of a woman. But it was a virgin birth, "*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*" (see Luke 1:35).

In an age of designer babies, cloning and talk of understanding and recreating human life, people still find it impossible to believe in the virgin birth. It seems we are capable of an arrogant faith in what we can do, but no faith in what God has done. Christ was divinely placed in Mary's womb. Jesus took human form but was divine. He was and could only be sinless. He alone could meet the righteousness of God and the need of man. These are fundamentals of the Christian faith and at Christmas we should pause and adore the God who moved towards us.

This movement of God took enormous power. We generally think of power being used to do very large things. Nanotechnology is the science and technology of building electronic circuits and devices from single atoms and molecules. It is heralded as the new and exciting breakthrough in science. On that first Christmas God was working on the smallest scale to show the largeness of His heart. He used all His power at the incarnation to become small.

In 2 Kings 4:8-37 Elisha raises the son of the Shunammite woman. Starting at 2 Kings 4:32 we read, "*When Elisha came into the house, there was the child, lying dead on his bed. He went in therefore, shut the door behind the two of them, and prayed to the LORD. And he went up and lay on the child, and put his mouth on his mouth, his eyes on his eyes, and his hands on his hands; and he stretched himself out on the child, and the flesh of the child became warm. He returned and walked back and forth in the house, and again went up and stretched himself out on him; then the child sneezed seven times, and the child opened his eyes*" (2 Kings 4:32-35).

Elisha stretched himself to become small - the size of a child (2 Kings 4:34). This is what Jesus did. He used all His power to become small - the size of a baby. He did this to enter our world, identify with our need and to give new life.

God moved earth, God moved heaven, and God moved Himself. Then in a final touch of grace He also moved some intervened in the hearts of some other people - the wise men. Matthew records their story in Matthew 2:1-12.

We can come to Christ in different ways. Some of us are led to Christ instantaneously. Just like the Shepherds we hear the good news of the Gospel for the first time and we respond immediately.

This does happen, but it is very rare. I can only think of very few people I know who came to Christ in this way. For most of us coming to Christ is a journey. Sometimes it is a very long journey on which different people and different experiences are used to eventually lead us to the Saviour.

The story of the wise men is such a journey. It is God who is again working behind the scenes to bring these men to Christ. The wise men had discovered a star which eventually led them to Jerusalem. The background to this story suggests the wise men were searching for something. God always responds to those who look for Him. Think of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8:26-40 or Lydia in Acts 16:11-15. These were people who were searching for God and God intervenes in their lives to present Christ to their hearts.

Whenever I think of the mysterious star seen by the wise men, I think of the work of the Spirit of God. It is His work to lead people to Christ. Jesus, speaking of the Spirit of God in John 15:26 says, *"He will testify of Me."* In John 16:13 He says, *"He will guide you into all truth"* and in John 16:14, *"He will glorify Me."* Just as Christ glorified His Father whilst He was on earth, so the work of the Spirit is to glorify Christ in our hearts.

When the wise men arrived at Jerusalem they made no secret about why there were there. They had come to worship the new king. Honesty and openness are characteristics which also please God. This was in stark contrast to the treachery and dishonesty in the heart of Herod. He saw the arrival of the promised Christ as a threat to his kingdom.

Self-interest was apparent at the birth of Christ and it was also apparent at His death when the chief priests delivered Christ to Pilate out of envy and the belief they would lose their position and status.

The birth of Christ teaches us a lot about what is in our hearts as well as what is in God's heart.

Herod asked the chief Priests where Christ was to be born (Matthew 2:4). The verse they refer to (see Matthew 2:5) is Micah 5:2, *"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."*

It is interesting that the Shepherd character of the Saviour is once more highlighted.

As a result of this scripture, the wise men take the final part of their journey to Bethlehem and rediscover the star which leads them to Jesus. The Bethlehem shepherds were ordinary working people. The wise men were sophisticated, intelligent and wealthy people. But the faith of the shepherds and the faith of the wise men was just the same. Entering into the simple home where Mary and Joseph now lived with their young child, the wise men fall down to worship Jesus. We all come to the Saviour in the same way. Rich or poor, educated or uneducated, simple or clever, Jew or Gentile, we need the same simple faith. The Christmas story shows how God came down to us and how we must come to God.

The wise men gave gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to Jesus (Matthew 2:11). I believe God directed these gifts.

First they were practical gifts. Soon Mary and Joseph would have to flee from Israel to Egypt to escape the violence of Herod. How would they be supported? The wise men provided for their need. But secondly and beautifully, the gifts seem to represent the character of Christ. Gold in the Old Testament was used in the Tabernacle and Temple for the things of God. It was the most precious and valuable metal and was used to represent God Himself. It reminds us that Christ is God. The frankincense was the perfume which ascended from earth up to God and reminds us of the Christ's humanity on earth, glorifying God in heaven, *"This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased"* (Matthew 3:17, Matthew 17:5).

Finally, myrrh was used to embalm the bodies of the dead - a poignant reminder of the reason Christ had entered the world to *"give His life a ransom for many"* (see Matthew 20:28, Mark 10:45). In these three gifts, the deity, humanity and sacrifice of Christ are represented.

It is wonderful to consider the extraordinary events surrounding the birth of His Son, Jesus Christ. God intervened in the lives of Mary and Joseph. God moved earth and heaven. God intervened in the simple lives of the shepherds. God also intervened in the sophisticated lives of the wise men. And, of course, He moved in the person of His Son Jesus Christ when He came from heaven to earth.

In the light of the power and majesty of the events of the first Christmas, let us pause and remember the extent of the love and grace that was shown towards us.

Let us not forget to reflect on the journey Christ made to Bethlehem, so that He could make the journey to Calvary. And let us ask ourselves the question, "If He gave so much for me, what can I give Him?"

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