

Part Four

BIRTH OF CHRIST

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THE BIRTH AND CHILDHOOD OF JESUS

Matthew and His Book

The Gospel of Matthew does not name its author, but there is abundant testimony of very early Christian writers (beginning with Papias who was a student of the apostle John) that it was written by Matthew the Apostle.

Very little is known about Matthew's life before and after the ministry of Jesus, of which he was an eyewitness. Jesus called him from the "receipt of custom" or "place of toll," for he was a tax-collector (Matt. 9:9-13; Mark 2:14-17; Luke 5:27-32). He was also called Levi, and he is named in every list of the Twelve (Matt. 10:3; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13).

The only word that Matthew has about himself is that he was a 'publican.' Publicans were collectors of Roman taxes, ordinarily extortioners, and generally despised. Luke tells us that Matthew made a great feast for Jesus, and forsook all to follow Him. But Matthew does not even give himself credit for that. He loses sight of himself utterly in adoration of his Hero. We love him for his self-effacing humility.

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Tradition says that Matthew preached in Palestine for some years, and then traveled to foreign countries; that he wrote his Gospel originally in Hebrew, and some years later, probably about 60 A.D., issued a more complete edition in Greek . . . The widely-held but unsubstantiated, present-day hypothesis that Matthew copied from Mark's Gospel is, on the face of it, absurd. It is not at all certain that Mark even knew Jesus. Why should Matthew have to copy from one who had not been an eyewitness accounts of things which he himself had seen with his own eyes and heard over and over with his own ears?¹

¹ Henry H. Halley, *Halley's Bible Handbook*, 24th ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1965), pp. 413-414.

The special emphasis of Matthew's Gospel is on showing that Jesus is the Messiah predicted in the Old Testament. He seems to write especially for Jewish readers and quotes frequently from the Old Testament.

In keeping with this purpose Matthew begins his account of Jesus with the genealogy, which shows that Jesus was qualified by birth to be the "seed of Abraham" (Gen. 12:3; Gal. 3:16) and the "Son of David" (II Sam. 7:12-16; Ps. 89:3, 4, 19-37; Isa. 9:6, 7; 11:1). This genealogy seems to give the lineage of Joseph, and that in Luke 3 the lineage of Mary. Thus Matthew records Jesus' line of legal inheritance, and Luke His line of blood relationship (cf. Rom. 1:3).

Brevity of the Records of Jesus' Childhood

All the Bible is wonderfully concentrated, limited to the essentials that accomplish its divine purposes. This characteristic is most plainly seen in the biographies of Jesus and especially in the accounts of His childhood. Only Matthew and Luke tell anything of His birth and youth. In them we find none of the usual descriptions of personal appearance or of childhood incidentals. All that they tell is what is needful to establish our faith in Jesus as the eternal Son of God, fulfillment of the prophecies, and the Son of man, having actually come in the flesh and being made in all things like unto His brethren.

Luke tells of Jesus' consciousness of His unique Sonship and life-mission at twelve years of age, and also gives a general statement of His manner of life and development in the Nazareth home (Luke 2:40-52).

Matthew tells only of His birth and His earliest childhood, not things that He did, but things that befell Him in the first months of His earthly life.

Now since the wisdom of God has so designed these inspired records, should we not conclude that these things contain important lessons for us? Should we not look for the meaning of the things revealed and not speculate on the things about which the record is entirely silent? These chapters tell so little, why tell anything at all? What should we see here?

His Identity

The most important things set forth in these accounts are the marks of identification of Him who was born. All of Christianity is the acceptance of Him as Lord and Saviour. All the proclamation of Christianity is the preaching of Jesus as "Lord and Christ," the tidings of a "Saviour, who is Christ the Lord." Anything disconnected

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from His Person, anything that can stand independent of His saving power and ruling authority is not distinctly Christian; for His Church is built upon that rock (Matt. 16:18) and without Him we can do nothing (John 15:5).

As the genealogies tell His human parentage and inheritance, so the angel, announcing the miraculous birth, tells His divine parentage: "conceived of the Holy Spirit" and "Son of the Most High."

His deity is declared in the name given Him in the prophecy of His virgin birth (Isa. 7:14); "Immanuel" means "God with us." The citation of Isaiah's prophecy naturally points to the further description of the "Son" in Isa. 9:6, 7, where He is called "Mighty God" and "Everlasting Father."

The Wise-men's coming and worshipping Him points out His deity; for no man merits worship. No righteous man will permit himself to be worshipped (Acts 10:25, 26); neither will an angel (Rev. 22:8, 9). Indeed angels worshipped Him at His birth (Luke 2:10-14 and Heb. 1:6).

Matthew, in chapters one and two, cites at least four Messianic prophecies fulfilled: concerning His birth of a virgin, His birth at Bethlehem, His being brought out of Egypt, and His being called a Nazarene. He says that the events fulfilled words (not necessarily predictive) of Jeremiah about the mourning for lost children. This history shows that the prophecies were not only such as could be applied after the events, but that there were prophecies of His coming which were so clear that such a birth was expected and the place was definitely known. Apparently without disagreement or hesitation the scribes told Herod that the Christ would be born at Bethlehem. The coming of the Wise-men is proof of application of prophecies or, at least, of some special revelations to them. It is most likely that they applied the Old Testament prophecies.

Josephus (an unbelieving Jew); Tacitus and Suetonius (pagan Roman historians) bear record of a general expectation in those times. Suetonius says: "There had been for a long time all over the East a prevailing opinion that it was in the fates that at that time some one from Judea should obtain the empire of the world."² All the three named agree upon the time when the person should appear, the place where he should arise, the greatness of his dominion, and

² Suetonius in *Life of Vespasian* quoted by Alexander Campbell, *The Christian Preacher's Companion*. (Joplin: College Press, n.d.), p. 43.

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the widespread nature of the expectation. Philo, Appian, Sallust, Plutarch, Cicero and Virgil are all said to have referred to predictions or expectations of the birth of a great conqueror or king fairly close to the time of Jesus birth.

In the Jewish prophets, . . . generally read all over the East, various express and clear predictions are written, fully warranting the expectation so often alluded to by all the reputed writers of that age. So early as the time of Jacob, it was intimated that Shiloh, of the tribe of Judah, would have the scepter and allegiance of the world . . . Gen. 49:10. The prophets afterwards mentioned the exact place where he should be born, . . . Micah 5:2. Daniel, as well as other prophets, also foretells the time of his nativity: 'From the going forth of the decree to restore and build Jerusalem' (7th year of Artaxerxes Longimanus—Ezra 7:21) 'unto the Messiah the Prince, shall be seven weeks and three score and two weeks' (of years—Dan. 9:24, 25). But the same prophet, in his interpretation of the dream of the Chaldean monarch, positively and unfiguratively asserts 'that in the days of the last kings (the Roman emperors) the God of heaven would set up a kingdom,' which should finally engross all the empires of the world, which kingdom would stand forever.'³

The star, the angels, the several revelations to Zacharias, Elizabeth, Mary, Joseph, Simeon, Anna, Shepherds, Wise-men, and again to Joseph—all these miracles surrounding the birth of Jesus point to Him as the Son of God and the promised One.

His Relation to the Old Testament

Matthew makes the connection between the old and the new covenants and shows the new unfolding out of the old. Jesus "came not to destroy the law or the prophets, but to fulfill" (Matt. 5:17). Any attempt to discredit the Old Testament is an attack upon the foundations of Christianity. Still, it is as if all the Old Testament were made to focus on Him and surrender its glory to Him. Though He comes after it He is not its follower but its Leader and Goal. What light it had was by reason of Him for whom it furnished a series of beacons to point through the darkness to "the true light, coming into the world."

³ Alexander Campbell, *Ibid.*, pp. 43-44.

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His Reception

As John said, "He came unto His own, and they that were His own received Him not" (John 1:11). Jerusalem had all the advantages over the rest of the world for knowing when and how and where He should come. Yet when He did come they knew nothing about it until they were told by Gentiles, and when they were told, they were troubled. There was no room in the inn for Him to be born—a symbol of cold indifference. Herod determined that there should not be room in the land for Him to live and grow—a symbol of the world's violent opposition to Him, already raising the cry, "Away with him!" Yet He was received by some poor shepherds, by holy and faithful individuals full of the Spirit, by strangers from a far country who believed the prophets.

His Father's Care of Him

God chose for His only begotten Son a humble home with parents who would reverence such a son and heed the instructions of the heavenly Father. Notice how promptly Joseph obeyed every command, though it meant disgrace, or excitement and sadness, or a long hard journey and indefinite exile.

God's care is shown in the supernatural warnings and directions given though angels to Joseph and in the providential supply of means for the sojourn in Egypt through the gifts of the Wise-men.

His Childhood Journeys

When Jesus was about six weeks old He was presented in the temple at Jerusalem. Sometime after that wisemen from the east followed the star to the house in Bethlehem where He was. Then, according to an angel's instructions, He was taken to Egypt till Herod's death. When Joseph and Mary returned from Egypt they apparently planned to go back to Bethlehem, but hesitated upon hearing of Archelaus, the son of Herod, upon the throne. Joseph was told in a dream to go and dwell in Nazareth, where they had lived before Jesus was born.

Nazareth is about 65 miles, in an air line, north of Jerusalem, but it is nearly 100 miles from Jerusalem by the usual pilgrim route around Samaria and down the Jordan valley. Nazareth is in the southern edge of the hills of Galilee, about 1000 feet above the plain of Megiddo (or Esdraelon) through which the trader's caravans passed on their way to lands east of the Jordan.

At the age of twelve Jesus was taken to Jerusalem for the Passover

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(Luke 2:41-51). The Passover was commanded by God through Moses as an annual commemoration of the great and miraculous circumstances of the deliverance of Israel from Egypt (See Exodus 12:14-20). All the men of Israel were required to go for the Passover (and for two other feasts each year) to the central sanctuary, which was the temple at Jerusalem (Exod. 23:17; 34:23). Hundreds of thousands of pilgrims thronged the roads to and from the city, traveling in large companies. It was easy for a boy to be lost from sight, especially since the men walked in one group and the women in another.

According to Jewish custom boys became "sons of the law" at 12 years of age and were then obligated to go to the feasts. But since Joseph and Mary "went every year," Jesus possibly had gone often before He was 12.

For Further Study:

Edersheim, Alfred. *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1956 (Reprint of 1886 ed.). Pp. 180-234. A study of birth and childhood narrative in the light of context of Jewish social religious life and Roman political influence.

Foster, R. C. *Studies in the Life of Christ*, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1971. Pp. 231-294.

Fowler, Harold. *The Gospel of Matthew*, Vol. I. Joplin, MO.: College Press, 1968. Pp. 31-86.

Harrison, Everett. *A Short Life of Christ*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1968. Pp. 32-65. Chapters on "The Birth" and "The Infancy and Boyhood."

Hendriksen, William. *New Testament Commentary: Gospel of Matthew*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1975. Pp. 130-193. Careful comment on the birth and childhood narratives.

LESSONS FROM THE GENEALOGIES
AND BIRTH ACCOUNTS¹

I. The genealogies show:

1. God always keeps His word, what He promised Abraham and David came to pass.
2. The sinfulness of human nature. Grace and goodness does not necessarily run in families. Human heritage could not account for Jesus.
3. How great was the mercy and the grace of our Lord Jesus! He was "not ashamed to call them brethren." He actually shared human nature and had fellowship with sinners, although He was sinless.

II. The recorded genealogy serves to establish and emphasize the following lessons:

1. That Christ was truly human, with a true close relationship with men.
2. That the past leads up to Him, and looked forward to His coming.
3. He is not accounted for by His ancestry.
4. He surpasses all the glories of the past, and sums up the best to be found in it.
5. The coming of Jesus was carefully planned and prepared for.
6. His coming fulfilled God's promises to Abraham, to Jacob, to Moses, to the nation, to David, to Isaiah and all the prophets.
7. His coming was appropriately in the kingly line, with the right to rule; but it was lowly and in keeping with His purpose to serve, to save and to restore.

Christ's First and Second Comings Compared

1. Both were prophesied.
2. Purpose of each: the first to be a Savior; the second to be Judge of all men, while perfecting the salvation of those who received Him as Savior.

¹ I am indebted to persons and sources no longer remembered for many of these points.

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3. He came "in the fulness of time" (when God knew everything was the best for the purpose); and He will come when God wants Him to, in the "fulness of time."
4. Many were not prepared for the first coming, and did not want it to happen. Many are not ready, and will not be ready, for the second coming. "Watch, and be ready."

Miraculous Nature of His Birth and Its Importance

1. Notice that His birth was accompanied by miraculous demonstrations and announcements, and that it was divinely extraordinary in the virgin conception.
2. This was in keeping with His divine nature and pre-existence.
3. He became man, but He was not an ordinary man; He was also God, the Son of God.
4. He was not born of a virgin because normal marriage is sinful or to avoid contamination with original sin; but to show that He came from God.
5. His life and ministry are entirely in keeping with His miraculous birth as the unique Son of God, and they are unexplainable without that divine nature.
6. No one can believe the New Testament is a reliable record and not believe in the fact of the virgin birth. The only record we have of His birth says it was a miraculous, virgin birth. The records are clear and unmistakable in meaning. If they are false, in this matter, they cannot be trusted in any other. There is nothing to account for such stories arising and being written in the New Testament, if they were not the truth.

Example of the Wise-men

1. It is wise to seek Christ.
2. They followed a divine guide, not feelings or nature or human wisdom.
3. The need of following all the way
4. It is wise to worship and give the best to our Lord.

For Further Study:

- Fowler, Harold. *The Gospel of Matthew*. Joplin: College Press, 1968. Pp. 11-31. Basic comment on Matthew's genealogy of Jesus.
- Geldenhuis, Norval. *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*. (New International Commentary). Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1951. Pp. 150-155. Very helpful brief ex-

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planation of genealogies.

Hendriksen, William. *New Testament Commentary: Gospel of Matthew*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1973. Pp. 105-129.

Deals with purpose of genealogies and the alleged contradictions. Machen, J. Gresham. *The Virgin Birth of Christ*. N.Y.: Harper and Row Publishing, 1930. Pp. 202-232. Valuable defense of the virgin birth. Full discussion of the genealogies. Machen holds both accounts trace descent of Joseph.

Robertson, A.T. *A Harmony of the Gospels*. New York: Harper and Row Publishing, 1922. Pp. 259-262. Deals with the problems of reconciling the two accounts and concludes that Matthew gives the descent of Joseph and Luke gives the descent of Mary.

GOD'S GREATEST GIFT

"Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom can be no variation, neither shadow that is cast by turning" (James 1:17). The earth and all that it contains is the Lord's. All we are and have has come from Him. But by far the greatest gift from God is His only begotten Son, given for our redemption. The other gifts reveal God's creative power and ownership of all things, but the gift of Christ reveals His love for us in the most impressive manner, Jesus, the Son, is God's greatest gift because in Him God gave of Himself and not of the things of His creation.

Christianity's Special Message

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16). This is the special message of Christianity. No wonder John 3:16 is called the Golden Text of the Bible. All that went before was to prepare for the coming of Christ; all that follows His coming has been to make Him known and effective in the lives of all men, and to look forward to His coming again. Christ is God's gift to *all* men. It is altogether fitting that this text has been translated into more languages than any other message. It is published in more than one thousand tongues.

This Golden Text of God's Word (John 3:16) bears witness to a surprisingly large amount of gospel doctrine:

1. That God is, and is good and loving.
2. That Jesus is the Son of God, specially sent into the world.
3. That Christ is the atonement for men's sins.
4. That faith in Him is the necessary condition of pardon and salvation.
5. That there is eternal reward or punishment awaiting every man.

This one verse emphasizes especially these four things: 1. *The sublimity of the gospel*, its sublime basis and source—"God so loved the world." 2. *The severity of the gospel*, its great cost, its stern realism—"that he gave his only begotten son." 3. *The simplicity of the gospel*, its simple all-transforming requirement to accom-

plish regeneration of men and to overcome the world, the flesh, and the devil—"that whosoever believeth on him." 4. *The security of the gospel*, its assurance of the gift of everlasting life to all who flee to Christ for refuge from the wrath to come—all who escape perishing shall partake of unlimited life with God—"should not perish, but have everlasting life."

The value of Christ as a gift to man is beyond all measurement, though it be considered from every point of view by which things are priced. His worth should be measured by the need of man to be saved from total loss and eternal despair because of sin, multiplied by all the men of all the ages, to whom there is no other help or hope but Christ. Add the value of His enlightenment and enrichment of this life for individual, home, and nation, plus the life eternal as children of God and joint-heirs with Christ. Estimate, if you can, what the gift cost the giver; evaluate the fact that it lasts forever without depreciation, ever increasing in preciousness to us. What can be compared with Him for rarity, purity, beauty, as a source of security, of joy, and of deep satisfaction? What can approach this personal, imperishable, powerful gift as an expression of the loving favor of Him who gave it?

"Herein was the love of God manifested in us, that God hath sent his only begotten Son into the world that we might live through him. Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (I John 4:9, 10).

"He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not also with him freely give us all things?" (Rom. 8:32). He "is able (and has proved Himself more than willing) to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think" (Eph. 3:20). "Fear not, little flock, it is the Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (Luke 12:32). "His divine power hath granted unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and virtue" (II Pet. 1:3).

This is the gospel—that Christ left His heavenly glory, became flesh and dwelt among us on earth, ministering unto men, even giving His life as a ransom for sinners, in order that we might know the love of God and be reconciled unto the Father, trust and serve Him, and receive the fullness of the benefits of His power and love both now and forever! This is the good news of divine truth—not a philosophy and not a dream.

When will men open their needy hearts to receive such a gift? Isn't it strange, and tragic, that of all the Christmas gifts, ill-fitting

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or useless, or hypocritically given, nearly all are received and appreciated except the one greatest gift of all and the cause of all Christmas giving. God's gift is commonly rejected, scorned by blind and ungrateful men who need Him more than they need anything else.

How Shall We Celebrate His Coming?

How can we express appreciation for such a gift? Surely it was loving appreciation and gratitude that started the celebration of Christmas. Although no one knows the date, or the season, or, indeed, even the year, in which Jesus was born, this season has been set by tradition and custom as the one in which His birth is celebrated; and we naturally think of His coming as the gift of God's love more at this season than at others. But we should not turn our thoughts to praise of His coming only once a year. Moreover, the celebration of Christmas has become so corrupted with commercialism, irrelevant traditions, pagan symbolism and even debauchery, that it is a poor and unworthy celebration of *the greatest gift of God*. How few there are, comparatively, who really exalt Christ worthily in their Christmas celebration! And those who do are those who exalt Him throughout the year in their worship and in their lives.

The Lord has made no provision and no request for any celebration in remembrance of His birth. But He has given the Lord's Supper and the special request that we keep it in remembrance of His death for our sakes. We should proclaim and praise the love of God and the coming of His Son in the flesh to save us, "in season and out of season." If we are moved, however, to sing His praises at the remembrance of His birth, we should certainly be happy to proclaim His death till He come, by keeping the Lord's Supper every Lord's Day. The only Christmas tree the Lord designed was the tree on which He Himself was hanged. As some poet has said:

"Rude and crude, it stood on a hill.

(In memory's fancy I see it still.)

Its festoons were nails—its streamers were blood;

The gift on that tree—the dear Son of God.

"Thanks to God for His unspeakable gift,

Who came from glory to heal the rift

Between man and God, that sin had made—

Our Lord on that tree the price fully paid."

"To obey is better than sacrifice" (I Samuel 15:22). The best way to honor the "Teacher come from God" is to hearken to His teaching. The

best way to exalt the Lord is to obey Him. The best appreciation of God's gift is to receive Him as Savior with love and lasting devotion.

In appreciation for His love, it is fitting for us to show love and to give gifts of love. True love is always giving. "Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another" (I John 4:11). We owe thanks unto God. "Thanks be to God for his unspeakable gift" (II Cor. 9:15). Notice the connection in which Paul makes this statement. Read II Corinthians eight and nine, and see that our gratitude for God's gift to us should lead us to give continually and liberally to His work and to the glory of His name. Too much of our Christmas giving is not in Jesus' name, but for our own glory in the eyes of men.

The Lord gave Himself to us. Surely the most fitting response is for us to give ourselves to Him for His glory and joy forever. We needed Him and not merely the things of His creation. He wants us and not merely the things we temporarily possess which, after all, are really His.

Christ Dwelling In Our Hearts

In Ephesians 3:14-19, Paul expressed his prayer that Christ might dwell in our hearts through faith. It was a great thing that the Son, eternal and powerful and equal with God, should "become flesh and dwell among us" even for His extraordinary life of about thirty-three years on earth. But it is a much greater thing to be realized and appreciated that He will dwell in our hearts throughout our lives and in all the generations of men (see John 14:23; 17:23; Revelation 3:20; Galatians 2:20).

The apostle prays that Christ may dwell in us in order that we may be firmly established and rooted fast in a foundation of love, and in order that we may be prepared to grasp the surpassing magnitude of Christ's love for us, and that we may know the knowledge-surpassing love of Christ and be filled with all the fullness of God. The perfect comprehension of the love of Christ is not possible to us, but we *can* have a *real* knowledge of that love which in its fullness surpasses knowledge. The realization of divine love is in store for the Christian who grows strong by means of His Spirit in the inward man. After the apostle's example, let us also pray earnestly for ourselves and our brethren in Christ, that we may increase in the power of spiritual perception and in participation in the spirit of Christ, until we may know by experience a real conception of the immeasurable love of God revealed and ministered in Christ—the love which sought us and bought us and seeks now to bless us above all we ask or think. "Behold, what manner of love!"

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For Further Study:

Lambert, G. 'Christmas' *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, ed. M. C. Tenney, Vol. 1, Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1975.

Smith, Wilbur M. *Great Sermons on the Birth of Christ*. Boston: W. A. Wilde, 1963. Collection of sermons on the birth of our Lord by famous preachers.

THE MESSAGE OF CHRISTMAS

There is perennial interest in the never-too-well-known story of the birth of Jesus, our Saviour. It really never grows old or loses its charm for the believer. Though the world grows old, this story is still unique; it is still "glad tidings of great joy"; it is still "to all the people." Though familiar, it is fresh; not merely because it is a rare idyll of rare beauty, but because of the deep and practical meaning that it always has for the present time for all people, and for the most significant things of life.

"What Mean These Stones?"

When Joshua led the tribes of Israel across the Jordan, while God held back the rushing waters and allowed them to walk over on dry ground, he took stones from the river bed to set up a monument on the bank. It was to cause the people to remember the great miracle, and to cause their children to ask, "What mean these stones?" Then they could tell the wonderful story of the faithfulness of God's promises, and of His great works in bringing them into the land. (Read Josh. 4). The celebration of Christmas is a monument to even greater works of God, sending His Son into the world to "bring many sons to glory." Christmas is especially adapted to make children ask, "What does it mean?" "Why do we have it?" We ought to keep it as a monument full of meaning!

I suppose that God is pleased if we celebrate, in sincerity, the coming of His Son into the world. However, He did not preserve for us a record of the day, or month, or even the year of that event. (Dating history from the birth of Christ was not invented until more than five centuries after, and did not come into general use for another five centuries. The monk who calculated the year of Jesus' birth made a mistake of at least five years, and the exact number can not yet be settled.) We simply agree to keep the traditional date, December 25, which has been commonly accepted since the fourth century. It is as good as any other. The Lord made no request or suggestion that we should celebrate the birth of Jesus, either at any particular time, or in any particular way, or at all. But the singing, rejoicing and worshipping done by Zacharias, Elizabeth, Mary, Simeon, Anna, the shepherds, angels, and Wise-men, in connection with the announcements and events of Christ's Nativity, are suggestive

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and somehow infectious. When we think seriously of the great unequalled event, we want to join in the psalms, carols, and adoration, and even in the prophetic dreams of what it will yet mean to the world of men that God's Son came to be one of us, born of a woman.

But, brethren, when we think of commemorating Christ's birth appropriately—when we consider whether Jesus Himself is pleased with Christmas—remember this: Jesus left a monument by which He did want to be remembered. He provided for a meaningful and solemn commemoration of His death in the "Lord's Supper." (See Matt. 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:14-19; Acts 20:7; I Cor. 11:23-28.) He was born to die—to be the Saviour of men (Matt. 1:21; 20:28; John 12:23-28, etc.). If we are sincere in our desire to hallow a special day or season to the memory of His birth we should neither refuse nor neglect to keep the memorial which He Himself consecrated to His death. We do not know that God wants us to keep Christmas; but we know for sure that He wants us to keep the feast of the communion of the body and blood of our Saviour (I Cor. 10:16). Since we do keep Christmas, let us make it a memorial of honor to Him and of meaning to our children—and ourselves.

Christmas Speaks!

Christmas does have a message for the world; let it speak clearly. It speaks of the love of God for man (John 3:16). Man at his best is dependent on God; but in his sin he is utterly helpless and hopelessly lost. The glorious thing about the birth of Jesus is the way it brings help on high and shows that man's sad condition matters to God.

There is considerable disposition today to treat Jesus as but a teacher, a prophet, a social leader. Let it be noticed that the Christmas message of the New Testament is clearly built around the essential fact that the Christ, or Messiah, is a Savior from sin. Joseph was clearly told that the name was to be Jesus, because He was to be a Savior from sin (Matt. 1:21), and He was announced to the shepherds as a Savior (Luke 2:11). The Christmas message is evangelistic.¹

The old priest, Zacharias, in his inspired psalm at the birth of John, said: God "hath visited and wrought redemption for his people, and hath raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant, David." He also said that John would go before the face

¹ *Christian Standard*, (Dec. 23, 1933), p. 3 (1023).

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of the Lord "to give knowledge of salvation unto his people in the remission of their sins" (Luke 1:68, 69, 77).

Christmas proclaims that God is faithful to keep His promises, which were made through the Old Testament prophets (Micah 5:2-4; Isa. 7:14; 9:6; 11:1, etc.). Notice how the decrees of heathen rulers and the deeds of men unconscious of God's purpose work together to fulfill His Word and the providential plan.

Christmas announces the coming of Immanuel, meaning "God with us" (Matt. 1:23), answering the cry of Job for a mediator (Job 9:33) and his desire that he might see God and settle with Him (Job 23:3 and 31:35), and bringing God's infinite power and wisdom to the aid of man with mercy equal to His righteousness. This means that we can now know God in the person of His Son who is the "brightness of his glory, and the very image of his substance" (Heb. 1:3), so that he who has seen the Son "hath seen the Father" (John 14:9). No less than a divine Savior can answer man's needs. His coming in the flesh gives us (1) the fixed certainty of historic facts of supernatural character as the basis for our faith, (2) absolute confidence in the covenant and the promises that He brings and offers to us, and (3) boldness to draw near to Him who has come so far to be near and helpful to us. We have great need of such a faith with firmness unto the end. The special information in the accounts of Jesus' birth that is worthy of space in the very brief accounts of His life is this: That Jesus is the only begotten Son of God, conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of a virgin.

The record of the exceedingly humble circumstances of Christ's birth emphasizes to us the great condescension of the Lord, becoming really human, subjecting Himself to the afflictions and temptations of the flesh. We know He was a man, but we realize more fully that He shared the flesh with us when we know He was a baby, too. Those same circumstances also proclaim eloquently that physical surroundings and such things as good housing, financial "security" and freedom from physical want are not everything in life, are not even necessary to greatness and glory undimmed. God can use the poor and humble when they that trust in riches, in worldly wisdom, and in political contrivance, can not be reached. The Christmas story warns us that the Lord Himself may be shut out of our lives by our being preoccupied with those other things. R. A. Torrey observed:

It was not that the inn was hostile, it was simply preoccupied. That is the trouble in men's hearts today. They should have made room in the inn for Jesus, even though every one and everthing

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else must be turned out, and we should make room for Him, no matter what else or who else has to go. They would have made room for Jesus had they known who He was. We do know, and yet we do not make room. Why not? (Jer. 17:9; John 15:24; Rom. 8:7).

Part of the Christmas message is the work and the interest of angels in accomplishing our redemption (Cf. Heb. 1:14 and I Pet. 1:12). Angels of heaven stood on earth with men and rejoiced at the works of God for the salvation of men. They also rejoice when one sinner repents (Luke 15:10).

The message that the angels brought began: "Fear not." All men, being defiled with sin, have great fear in the presence of the righteous power of God or holy messengers from heaven, ever since Adam was afraid and hid himself. God is trying to reconcile us unto Himself, to take away our sin and to take away our fear. We do need to reverence Him, and the reverent "fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom," but we need also to trust Him. "Fear not, little flock, it is the Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (Luke 12:32).

It is "good tidings of great joy" that Christmas angels bring. They know that it is not for their salvation, but for us; yet they rejoice greatly to see the goodness of God (Cf. Heb. 2:16.) How ought men to rejoice! At the coming of Jesus for our redemption we should have greater joy than men being released from a prison camp, greater than the joy of a blind man receiving sight, greater joy than that of a battle-weary soldier at the coming of peace, joy that exceeds all these, because the coming of Jesus to earth means all this to us and much more. The best good news the world will ever hear is this ancient gospel, the story of Jesus, a Savior who is Christ the Lord. O that all were as humble and believing as those lowly shepherds.

It is a message of peace. "The angels invoke blessing on God and peace upon men, peace between God and man, and ultimately peace between man and man. The love of God is shed abroad upon all, even the vilest of sinners (Rom. 5:8; I Tim. 1:15); but this peace comes upon those who have accepted His Son, and in whom He is therefore especially well pleased (Rom. 9:11)."²

For Further Study:

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² J. W. McGarvey and P. Y. Pendleton, *The Fourfold Gospel*, (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing Co., n.d.), p. 31.

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