

Announcing . . . Christ's Birth!

The Significance of Jesus' Birth

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Today we are a week a way from Christmas, if you have not noticed. We have been in the Christmas season since Halloween, and before. You go into a store, any store, it does not matter, (you could even go to buy maybe cow feed) and they would have Christmas jingles over the speaker. Turn on the radio, turn on the TV, open a magazine or a newspaper, glance at a billboard, or even walk down your street and see all the nice pretty little lights twinkling in the night, ...do all this, and you will get your stomach full of Christmas in one way or another, ...ad nauseam.

You go into some of these places and you will hear the tune, "Little Drummer Boy," and you will spend *at least* a half hour trying to get this tune out of your head. Or maybe you will hear "Jingle Bell Rock." That is a good one. Or maybe you will hear "Feliz Navidad." I was born in Southern California, and that is one we heard all the time. They probably play it in Texas too.

Something similar to this happened to me a few weeks ago, and I was kind of rankled. Here I was just minding my own business, and suddenly I was assaulted by Christmas stuff all over the place. I was feeling quite perturbed and a bit frustrated. I could not really get a grasp on what it was that frustrated me so much, and why I was so perturbed that this Christmas stuff was rankling me. I could not really put my fingers around it and say this it what it is that I am really ticked off about.

As I began to put together what was a sermonette a couple of weeks ago, it finally dawned on me what it was that was bothering me so much. The world, with its ditties and pretty lights and catch-phrases and nativity scenes, has taken all the meaning out of Christmas. You know that sounds pretty strange coming from a member of the church, does it not, that someone would think that the world has taken all the meaning out of Christmas. But I said it for effect to get you thinking. You know that I would not say that we are to keep Christmas. I do not say that. I would never preach that we should, but it is very true that the world's keeping of Christmas has wrung the meaning out of all the biblical passages that deal with Christ's birth. Now they are nothing more than Christmas ditties.

A man like Handel tried to put the glory in some of those biblical passages in "The Messiah," but in most cases everything is trivialized, commercialized, or some way denigrated so that the real meaning is hidden anymore, or it is put aside. It is not something that makes us feel the glory of what actually happened, what the Bible's writers, especially Matthew and Luke, were saying and trying to get across to us in those passages.

The accounts of Christ's birth are now so commonplace and stereotyped that we do not even give them a thought. We as church members tend to avoid them because they do have the connotations of the world's way of looking at Christ's birth. Many of us do not even look at those passages in the Bible anymore. We skip over them because their meaning has been lost, but

they really are quite significant when you come down to it. If they were not significant, God would not have included them in the Bible in two different gospels. There is something to them that helps us. What I see in them is fulfilled prophecy for one, things that build our faith, things that build our hope, as well as elements that give us instruction and edification.

Just to pound this nail in, I would like to start in II Timothy 3.16-17, because sometimes we want to put these passages to the side and think of them as less than some of the other ones because of the way the world has hijacked them.

II Timothy 3:16 All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, [and we will see that there are a few bits of doctrine in these passages], for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.

You will see that some of the players in this were quite righteous people, and their example is a good instruction for us.

II Timothy 3:17 That the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.

Today I want to go over a few of these passages relating to Christ's birth since we are in that season where the world is looking at it. I hope by seeing them in a more correct light we will have a greater appreciation for them than the traditional worldly "Christian" Christmas portrayal.

Let us begin in Luke 1. We are going to try to do this in chronological order. We will be flipping between Luke and Matthew primarily. Most of you probably know these somewhat by heart, because they are Christmas songs, or they are recited in Christmas plays at schools and in Protestant churches. You have probably heard them for years and years.

Luke 1:26-38 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 [or Joshua]. 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." 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.

What struck me the most I think when I first got into this particular passage was that Luke is an extraordinary historian. He is a historian "par excellence." He not only gives us the facts of what

happened, but he also tells us a very entertaining story on top of it, and in doing so he uses an economy of words. He was a master of concise writing, putting everything in a nutshell for you. In a way, it is good to be able to explore it a little bit to get more of the detail. Sometimes economy is fair, and it helps us to understand, but at times it leaves out maybe a few of the details that might be interesting to know.

One of the things that he is very good at is making the reader make the right connections between what had happened before, and what was going to happen. He was maybe the most literary of the writers of the gospels. He was writing it as a story, but also as a piece of literature.

There is belief that he was sponsored in the writing of this by this Theophilus, and so this Theophilus may have required him, or asked him to write this story as best he could, not just from the facts that he put it all down in a way that was true, (and obviously Luke would do that), but also to make it as a piece of literature that would be widely accepted within the Greek world because the Greeks were high-falutin' when it came to the arts. What I mean is that they had a very high standard of writing, of art, of music, and of those other types of fine arts, and they would expect something that would be credible to have these literary details in them.

So you will find, I think, that Luke tends to be a little more literary in his approach to Christ's life. He has foreshadowings, he has good references back to what came before, but he is also very entertaining, and he moves the story along with an economy of words.

As a biographer, Luke wants us to know what happened in Christ's life, but as a member of God's church, and most likely a minister as well, he also wants to teach us what Jesus said and meant to a Christian. So all this is packed in the book of Luke.

Luke 1:26-27 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.

Any modern newspaper editor would look at this and say, "What a wonderful opening paragraph for this story." "Who?" "What?" "When?" "Where?" and you will find out that he gets to the 'Why?' right away. He writes it like it is a newspaper story. Everything is set out in order, so you know the exact scene. He sets it in just a few words. He tells you when: "In the sixth month," meaning that it is the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, because he had just finished talking about Elizabeth conceiving.

He tells you wh Gabriel. An angel was sent by God. He was an agent of a greater power. Where was he sent? To a city in Galilee called Nazareth—a specific place, the where. And whom was he sent to? A virgin. Betrothed to whom? Joseph. And what about Joseph's significance? Joseph was of the house of David, of the lineage of David, and that makes Mary important because she was marrying into the kingly line. He does not tell you, at least here, that Mary herself was from the kingly line, because it was more important that the male line be from David in this case. And then he tells you her name: Mary. He also repeats what was so significant about Mary in another sense, that she was a virgin. He mentions it twice.

Luke 1:28 And having come in, the angel said to her, "Rejoice, highly favored one, the

Lord is with you; blessed are you among women!"

Now if any of you are former Catholics you will recognize this verse from the King James, (actually from the Latin Vulgate)—"Hail Mary, full of grace." It is the "Hail Mary" that the Catholics recite when they do their rosary. But do you know what? The Greek does not say anything like that. I do not know where the Catholics get their authority to say that, because it is very clear in the Greek that the Catholic interpretation is all wet, and it sure does not say here that we are to pray this to her. This was something that was said ~~to~~ her by an angel.

I will paraphrase what the angel says to her. He says: "Rejoice Mary, because you have found favor with God." That is something to be happy about, is it not, that God has looked down and found favor with us, that He thinks highly of us, that He wants to bless us in some way. That is what He has done here with Mary.

"He is with you," the angel says. That is how highly favored she was, that God had decided to be with her. "And you are blessed among all women to be chosen for this honor that God has given you."

What this shows is that the blessing, the favor, the honor are not something that Mary should be adored for, but something that *God* should be adored for, that He is able to bestow such a thing upon a person. Where do these things—the blessing, the favor, the honor—originate? She had nothing in herself that really qualified her for these things except that she was a pretty good person. She was not converted. She was doing her best. But God looked down and decided that her life was pretty good for one who was still carnal, and He decided to bestow His grace, in a sense, upon her.

It was not that she had the grace already, as the Catholics say. They say she was born perfect, and full of grace, that she had been holy from the womb. That is not what this says at all. It says, "God has granted this to you out of His lovingkindness and mercy—to you personally." Who gets the honor and the glory then? God. The Catholics have read it entirely backwards.

She was an ordinary girl. Most of the commentaries think she was somewhere around fourteen years old, because that was the common age when they married at the time. She may have been older. Joseph himself may have been a little bit older, and he might have wanted a slightly older wife than was normal. We do not know. That is just tradition.

Just to add something to this to really, I hope, consternate all the Catholics that may be listening to this, or one of them maybe, you will notice the angel said, "Blessed are you among women!" Something happens during Christ's ministry where Christ stands this on end. Turn to Luke 11:27. Christ is out there preaching.

Luke 11:27-28 And it happened, as He spoke these things, that a certain woman from the crowd raised her voice and said to Him, "Blessed is the womb that bore You, and the breasts which nursed You!" But He said, "More than that, blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it!"

Does this tell you that Mary is for all time "blessed and full of grace"? Or does this say that those of you who are sitting in this room, and those of you who are converted, those of you who are listening on the phone hookup, are more blessed than Mary was when she had Christ? You

have found more favor with God than Mary did when she was chosen to be Christ's mother. Is that not something! Here the greatest honor that could ever be bestowed on a single human being was done to her, but we find out that it was not the greatest single honor that could ever be done to a human being. The greatest honor is that you have been "called and chosen," and you are now more blessed than she who had the womb that bore Christ.

Does that not raise us up a notch, and on the other hand make us tremble in responsibility for what we have been given? What honor! Then He says that among men, John the Baptist was the greatest. But those who will be in the Kingdom of God are greater than he, even though the least in the Kingdom. So once we are born into God's Kingdom we are going to be even greater than this, and more blessed, to be truly born sons and daughters of God.

Does that not raise your estimation of these verses when you see yourself in it? Here God blessed Mary among all women, but we find out that we are more blessed than she ever was until she was converted. And then she had that greater blessing of hearing God's Word and obeying it. That is where her glory comes—again from God.

Luke 1:29 But when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying....

She was kind of perplexed, disturbed. It says that she was troubled at his sayings. This has a connotation of agitation, of perplexity. She was puzzled. She did not know what to think.

Luke 1:29....and considered what manner of greeting this was.

If you read anything about Mary, you find out that one of her strongest points was that "she hid things in her heart" it says in one place. She considered things. She mulled things over. She thought them through. She was a very serious teenager. She did not just suddenly go and do something once she heard it the first time. She sat down and she thought about it. Even though it might trouble her a little bit, she was patient enough, and wise enough at this young age to think it out. A good example, even for us older people who have been through a few things.

I could imagine a flighty young teenage girl saying, "Oh! Oh! What's happening? There's an angel here! He just called me highly favored among women." But she did not. She was very calm. She was perplexed, she was slightly agitated, but she took the time to think about what was going on.

Luke 1:30 Then the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God."

Once again he calms her down. He basically says, "Calm down. What's happening is a good thing, Mary. This has come as a blessing from God to you." Then he goes on to explain.

Luke 1:31-32 "And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name 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."

We read this straight through and we think it is just something that he was telling her, but what he was actually doing was quoting Scripture to her. Let us go back to Isaiah 7:14. These were very well done paraphrases of some of the Messianic prophecies that I am sure that the Jews

had on the tip of their tongue all the time, because they were expecting Messiah to come, and so they knew these scriptures. They knew these things had to come to pass for Messiah to be born.

Isaiah 7:14 Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call His name Emmanuel.

What did Gabriel say? "Behold, you will conceive in your womb and shall bring forth a Son, and shall call His name Jesus." He changed the name. Not really changed the name, he just used another name that He normally would be called: Jesus, which means "Savior." If you think about it, it really means "God with us," because only God Himself can save, so it has the same connotation. Only through God can we truly be saved. And since He would be here—a man born of a woman—He would be "God in the flesh among us," which is what Emmanuel means—"God with us."

Luke 1:32-33 "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."

Let us go to Isaiah 9 and see where he got most of the rest of this.

Isaiah 9:6-7 For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of His government and peace there will be no end. Upon the throne of David and over His kingdom, to order it and establish it with judgment and justice from that time forward, even forever. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this.

He paraphrased that, cut it down a little bit, but he told them "He will be great, and will be called Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David, and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His Kingdom there will be no end."

How did he convince Mary of what was going on? By quoting the Old Testament to her, saying, "Look Mary. God has chosen you to fulfill these prophecies." And then she asked, "How can this be though? I have not known a man. I can't have a baby. Joseph and I have not consummated the marriage."

Luke 1:35 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."

This is one of those doctrinal verses. The doctrine comes in the doctrine of the Holy Spirit.

You will remember that the Bible deals with Israel, especially the Old Testament, and at this time He was dealing with the Jews. The Jews spoke Hebrew (or Aramaic by this time), and Hebrew and Aramaic used parallelism quite a bit in the way that they spoke. They said things twice, but slightly different so that you understand where they are coming from, what they are exactly trying to say. They pin the meaning down by saying a thing first one way, and then by giving its slight synonym, maybe slightly off, to modify the meaning just a little bit. This is what

Gabriel does to her. He speaks to her in a parallelism.

"The Holy Spirit will come upon you." (End of the first clause.) And then he defines what he means. "And the power of the Highest will overshadow you." So you put those two together, (at least the first parts). It says the Holy Spirit is the power of the Highest. It does not say that the Holy Spirit is a third person in a trinity. He says the Holy Spirit is the power of God to affect this miracle.

If you think about it, just trying to be a little logical, (let us assume a Trinitarian stance on this), if the Holy Spirit impregnated Mary, would that not make the Holy Spirit the father of Jesus, and not God the Father? But that cannot be. Someone would say, "The Holy Spirit is part of God. They're three in one. They're all co-equal." But if you think about it, if you look at it that way, then the Son is His own father, and that does not make sense at all.

They have to be two separate beings—the Father (or the one who is God, and then the Most High), and then there was the Word. It was the Word who became flesh and dwelt among us. Once that happened through the agency of the Holy Spirit, then there was the Father (who is the Most High, and always will be), and then there is the Son (who is still the Word—the Living Word—the Word made flesh who dwelt among us).

They both use that agency of the Holy Spirit, which is in us, and by which we also are to conduct our lives through its agency and power, because He has granted it to us. This is another thing that shows how highly favored we are with God. This is the more doctrinal area that this section brings out.

I also want to go into the word "overshadow" a little bit because this was very comforting to her. To us it sounds like it might be intimidating to be overshadowed by the power of the Highest. But Mary must have been pretty keen as far as the scriptures go, because it did calm her down. There is no reaction in here that it frightened her.

Let us go back to Exodus 40: 34. This is probably what she thought of. It is the same type of language, and I am sure Gabriel was speaking in Aramaic, and it made these scriptures pop into her head.

Exodus 40:34-38 The cloud covered the tabernacle of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter the tabernacle of meeting because the cloud rested above it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. When the cloud was taken up from above the tabernacle, the children of Israel went onward in all their journeys. But if the cloud was not taken up, then they did not journey till the day that it was take up. For the cloud of the Lord was above the tabernacle, [it overshadowed the tabernacle] by day, and the fire was over it by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel, throughout all their journeys.

Now remember, Gabriel had told her, "the Lord is with you." That was one of the first things he told her. And then when she asked, "How am I supposed to conceive without having had any sexual intercourse with a man?" he told her that the glory of the Lord would come upon her. This is basically what he meant when he said that "the power of God will overshadow you," just like the cloud in the wilderness provided shade for the Israelites in their journey. It was a

comforting thought that God would be above them like an eagle in the nest, with its wings outspread, protecting, providing, helping, and also doing miracles on their behalf.

What is it that we think of when we think of the Israelites in the wilderness? The constant miracles that happened. If it was not dividing the Red Sea, it was providing manna. If it was not providing manna, it was providing quail. If it was not providing quail, it was providing water. If it was not providing water, it was providing shade. If it was not providing shade, it was providing that their shoes and clothes did not wear out. If it was not that, it was providing security. It was providing defeat of their enemies. It could go on and on.

Through Gabriel, God was telling her, "I'm going to take care of all this. You don't have to worry, Mary. The glory of the Lord will take care of it all for you. He'll provide for you, He'll do the miraculous impregnation. You don't have to worry. It's not going to hurt a bit, because God's got this base covered."

It was very comforting I am sure for her to know that her God would overshadow her during this time, and walk with her everywhere she went, that there would be no problems because this was the most important Being ever to be born.

And then he gives her a sign. It is a sign to confirm what he has just said. He says, "Mary, if you want any proof of this, just go and visit Elizabeth—the one that everybody has always teased because she hasn't had any children. She's six month's pregnant. She's been hiding for five months because she doesn't want anybody to know. But we want you to go and see her, and this will be a sign to show you that everything's going to be okay."

Do you know what happened? Mary goes to visit Elizabeth, and John the Baptist leaps in Elizabeth's womb, confirming both to Elizabeth and to Mary that everything that they had heard up to this point was true. There was a "two for one" in that. That is in verses 39 to 42. What is interesting in verse 42 is that Elizabeth mimics what the angel said to Mary—"Blessed are you among women. Blessed is the fruit of your womb."

Just as an aside here to show you the comfort of the overshadowing presence of God, let us go to Luke 9:33. This is Luke's version of the transfiguration.

Luke 9:33-34 And it happened, as they were parting from Him, that Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; and let us make three tabernacles: one for You, one for Moses, and one for Elijah"—not knowing what he said. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were fearful as they entered the cloud.

This was not just the cloud overshadowing them. They actually went in and entered the cloud, so that is where their fear came. Notice what was happening:

Luke 9:35-36 Then a voice came out of the cloud, saying, "This is My beloved Son. Hear Him!" And when the voice had ceased, Jesus was found alone. But they kept quiet, [I bet they did! They were probably stunned into real fear of what they had just witnessed] and told no one in those days any of the things they had seen.

They just were not overshadowed, they went *in* the cloud, where God's voice boomed out at them—"Listen to My Son." That sort of idea went with Jesus His whole life.

I want to show you two more things here in Luke 1: 37-38.

Luke 1:37 For with God nothing will be impossible.

This is later repeated by Jesus. He tells His disciples, "For with God nothing is impossible." That is okay the way it is translated here. It gives you a pretty good sense of what he meant. But it is another one of these things where Gabriel comforted Mary by referring to an Old Testament scripture. Now what may be a better more literal translation of this is, "For no saying from God shall be void of power," or "For no word from God shall be powerless." That would be a literal translation. But this is a paraphrase of Isaiah 55: 10-11. Isaiah 55 is that chapter that says, "Ho! all you that thirst!" This is what Gabriel probably was referring to. God has just finished saying, "My thoughts are higher than your thoughts as the heavens are higher than the earth," and then He goes on to say:

Isaiah 55:10 For as the rain comes down, and the snow from heaven, and do not return there but water the earth and make it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower and bread to the eater.

What he is saying is that the cycle of rain works to produce food, that the rain just does not go down on the earth and then disappear and do nothing. But when the rain comes down, it makes the seed germinate and it waters the plant, and the plants grow and they become food then for us to eat.

Isaiah 55:11 So shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; It shall not return to Me void....

This is what Gabriel was paraphrasing. God's Word will not return to Him powerless, without effect.

Isaiah 55:11....But it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it.

So what did Gabriel do but say, "Mary, Isaiah prophesied that God's power, when it is sent forth from His mouth in words, accomplishes what He sets out for it to do. It is no less than what I am telling you today. You are the virgin that shall conceive and bring forth a Son, and we'll call His name Emmanuel. He will grow up and He will make sure that everybody's sins can be forgiven. He will be the Savior, and He will take the throne of His father David, and rule forever and ever. The power of the Lord of Hosts will accomplish this. You can be sure of it, because God's sayings don't return to Him void."

So he is putting a stamp on the end of it, saying, "This is certain. It's already been determined, because God has said so." Then look at the wonderful example of Mary when she responds to this when she is completely convinced by this last thing that he has said.

Luke 1:38 Then Mary said, "Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word." [And with that, knowing that she meant it,] And the angel departed from her.

This reminds me very much of Hannah and her attitude, asking God for a son that she later gave to the Lord as His prophet—Samuel. What Mary did here was submit unconditionally to

what God had told her through Gabriel. Basically she says, "I present myself the handmaiden of the Lord. He can do with me what He will."

She just totally gave her life to this, and that is what she ended up doing. Her whole life was taken up, from what we understand, bearing the Son, raising the Son, watching the Son die, and then becoming part of the Son's church, and evidently traveling with John for quite a bit of his ministry. She gave her life to God at this point. It was not her conversion necessarily, but her attitude is just sterling, and here she is, a teenager most likely.

Let us read Matthew 1, because we are not done with announcing things here. God announced it to Mary, but there is the other guy who is a couple of doors down who was probably pounding on a rock, trying to get it to fit into whatever house or barn or store, or whatever it was he was constructing at the time, and he needed to be told, because he was betrothed to this woman and he was very much involved in this whole process. God could not forget him, but He did wait. It is more than likely He waited several months, because by this time it had become apparent that Mary was pregnant, and Joseph got word of it. Either Mary told him, or a relative whispered in his ear and said, "Don't you know that Mary's pregnant? What are you going to do about it?"

Matthew 1:18-25 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. 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. And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name JESUS, for He will save His people from their sins." Now all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying: "Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Emmanuel," which is translated, "God with us." 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.

It seems like Joseph was a naturally kind and caring man. He was well suited to Mary in that he also did not fly off the handle when he found things out. He was a thoughtful man. He was considering what to be done. He thought about things. Now people back then had a lot more time to think about things, but that is no excuse for us.

He thought about what was going on, and he thought about the best way to handle the situation. Pretty sticky. Here a woman could possibly be shamed for her whole life, and he was not just going to get mad and say that he had been deceived and that he was made a cuckold, or whatever. No, he sat down and he thought about the situation, how he could do this as quietly as possible without bringing any further shame upon Mary, or upon himself for that matter. So he thought about it, and while he was still thinking about it, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. This was probably Gabriel. He seems to be the one that was sent in these announcement things.

What is interesting is that throughout this here, Joseph is shown to be a very humble, pious, obedient man that he takes what the angel says to him without any complaint. He does not even answer back. It just simply says that once he was aroused from sleep, Joseph did as the angel commanded him. He just did it. It was enough. He was convinced. He would comply.

What Gabriel tells Joseph is almost the same as he told to Mary. This is kind of odd, seeing that it was through Joseph that He would claim the kingship physically, but the angel does not mention that He, his adoptive Son, would be King. This is interesting, from Matthew especially, because throughout Matthew he is always mentioning how Jesus would be King, or is a King; but in this instance Gabriel does not tell Joseph that his Son is going to be King, and that His Kingdom would go on forever and ever. What he tells Joseph is that this Son that would be born to Mary, whom everyone would think would be his son, will save His people. He will be Emmanuel—God with us, and that He would be conceived of the Holy Spirit. And that was enough.

This kind of tells you that Joseph was not the kind of person where his lineage from David had gone to his head. At least it seems that way to me. He did not need the spur of his adoptive Son of being the King to make him comply. All he needed to know was that this was done of God through the Holy Spirit, and that this Baby would one day save His people. What a guy! God found the perfect couple to raise His Son—perfect as He could find among the Jews who had the right lineage at the time.

They are wonderful examples of submission to God. They just did it. Even though this threw a great big monkey-wrench into all their plans, they were selfless, and they said, "So be it, Lord. What do You want me to do next?" And that was it.

Luke 2:4-7 And 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. 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.

This is all very straightforward again. It is just like Luke to write a newspaper account. He just went through it very succinctly and tells you what happens. This was probably around the harvest time. Remember they went up to Bethlehem to be registered for the tax that had been called, and normally this was probably done after they were finished harvesting their fields so that they (1) would not be working and (2) that they would have the money to pay the tax. That was very important to the Romans that they had the money to pay the tax.

Our best guess then is that Jesus was begotten, that this thing in Luke 1:26-38 happened sometime probably toward the end of December, which is kind of ironic, but that He was not born then until the end of September sometime. The best time that we have been able to figure out is right around the Day of Trumpets in 4 B.C. Now I am not saying that is a "Thus says the Lord" in any way, but it was around the fall holy days sometime.

That it was around the fall holy days, and that this taxing was going on at this time tells you why there was no room in the inn. People would have started to come to Jerusalem for the holy days to be there at Trumpets, and stayed through then to the Last Great Day. Bethlehem, being

only about six miles outside of town, would probably have quite a bit of overflow, and so there was no room anywhere around there.

Jerusalem's population swelled to, I think, a couple of million during the holy days. You can understand there was no room. They did not have a Holiday Inn or something to go to. They had to go wherever they could. They ended up in a grotto probably, a cave behind an inn, or a place where travelers could stay. That was the only place. They did have a roof over their heads. They ended up, probably, in a cave. His first crib was a trough for the animals.

Many people think that these swaddling cloths are rags, but that is not the case. It was a custom of the time to wrap the child in strips of cloth, especially the limbs in order to make them grow straight. I do not know what their thinking was on all this, but if we were putting it in today's vernacular, we would say, "He would be in a manger wrapped in a receiving blanket, and that's how you'll find Him. You'll know who it is." It is really nothing more significant than that. He was born in a grotto, a cave, or some sort of out-building where they kept animals. His first crib was a trough of some sort. It probably was a small one, and He was wrapped in a receiving blanket, or something of the modern equivalent to that.

Luke 2:8-14 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 cloth, lying in a manger." 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, good will toward men!"

And then the angels went away, and the shepherds said, "Wow! We've got to go see this. We can't just stand here and do nothing."

What is all this that happened? We will not go into all the details. We just said it was September sometime or maybe early October. It was not December because the shepherds would not have been out in the fields at the time. It was rainy season. They did not want to keep the sheep in the rain anymore than they wanted to be there themselves. They would have brought the sheep in. Had it been December they would not have been out in the fields. This is another good little verse to show that it was probably sometime earlier in the year.

Verse 9 is a little bit toned down. I think it should read, "And BOOM! an angel of the Lord before them." Or "POOF!" Or "SHAZAM!" It is the idea of that. This was something that happened suddenly. This was something that shocked them it was so sudden, that right there in front of them, probably hovering over their heads, was an angel in all the glory of God, and the light shone all around them.

Now what would your reaction be? It says they were greatly afraid. That is toned down. They were terrified out of their skulls! People today think about being visited by aliens suddenly out of the night, but what if it were really an angel suddenly appearing before your eyes, with this huge light shining all around them like they were in a big spotlight, and this being is looking at

you? I would say we would be on our faces pretty quick, probably holding our heads, wondering when the next thunderbolt is going to fall.

Luke 2:10 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."

Gabriel here tried to shush their fears a bit, although I do not know what success he had. At least he was able to talk to them and get across what he needed to say. Evidently they were calmed, that this being that appeared in all of God's glory, (and that's what it says—"The glory of the Lord shone around them."), that they were able to stand there and listen, or sit there and listen, or lie there and listen.

What he says here is very interesting. It says, "I bring you good tidings of great joy," but the Greek word that is in there is *evangelize*. "I evangelize you" is literally what it says. What he says is, "I'm evangelizing you of great joy." In a way this is the beginning of the preaching of the gospel, because this is the sense of what he says. "I'm bringing you good news. I'm sent as an evangelist from God to let you know that the way of salvation is beginning to open." This is good news for people like the shepherds who were not looked upon as being very much, or never have been.

But to whom did God send the announcement among people that were not Joseph and Mary? He sent it to the shepherds out in the field, which has a very interesting spiritual connotation. What were the shepherds looking over, watching over? The sheep. And when was it? Night. "And the light suddenly shined all about them." And this was good news. The shepherds could then tell the sheep that a way had been opened for salvation (speaking more in a spiritual sense here), and then they could lead and guide the flock where God instructed them.

It is interesting too that he says, "This joy which will be to all people." This has a definite article, and it is *the* people. When they say *the* people in the Bible, that is normally Israel. This is great joy for all of Israel that the Savior has come. Take that spiritually. Are you not happy that you have been saved, or are being saved as the Israel of God? Is that not something to rejoice about?

Luke 2:11 "For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."

This is very much similar to what he told Mary. He gets across all the essentials, that He was born as is said in the Old Testament that He would be, and that He was in the city of David, which fulfilled the prophecy. He was called Savior, which also fulfilled other prophecies that were in the Old Testament of course. He is called Christ the Lord.

Now this "Christ the Lord" phrase is very interesting. It is literally "Messiah Yahweh (or YHVH, as it would have been in Aramaic). What they are saying here is that He was Messiah, but He was also the Lord of the Old Testament. This was not some simple announcement that "Hey! A baby's been born in Bethlehem you ought to go see." This was "God has been born in Bethlehem! He's the One we've all been waiting for."

Luke 2:12 "And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger."

He tells them what they are to see when they go to this grotto to find the Baby.

Luke 2:13-14 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, good will toward men!"

This is very interesting because here is another BOOM! in this narrative. "And suddenly." There was not just one angel in the glory of the Lord, there was a whole host of them all around them. Not only were they there, they were singing as only angels can sing, praising God. They ratchet up the importance of it here a bit of what was happening. I get the impression that they were all standing there waiting, "Okay Gabriel. Come on. Come on. Finish saying this. Tell them that He'll be in a manger." BOOM! "Here we are! Let's sing!"

They were overjoyed that this part of God's plan had happened. Another step had been accomplished. They know what is going on. I should also add here as an aside that this was not just the heavenly choir. This was the heavenly *army* that came. It was not just any old angels. These were the "fightin'" angels. It was God's army that came to announce this. Their General had just been born. That is how important this announcement was, and it went to shepherds watching over their sheep by night.

I do want to explain this hymn that they sang: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace good will toward men!"

This word *glory* that is praise, honor, credit, tribute, worship—the highest thing that we could say or give to God—is what they meant. In the Aramaic I am pretty sure that the words that they used here for "God in the highest," is not really "in the highest." I think they were probably saying "to the Most High God," because that is a common title of God in the Old Testament. "Glory, honor, praise, devotion, adoration, worship to the Most High God," they are saying.

Why would they say "peace"? One of Christ's titles is "The Prince of Peace," and He had just been born. The Prince of Peace would eventually bring peace on earth. He would have to do it first through His sacrifice, and later He will come and bring peace with the sword. He will have to impose peace at His second coming, but once it is done, it will be done, and there will be peace on earth. It is only because this Son was born in Bethlehem that the process of bringing peace to the earth could happen. That is why there could be peace on earth.

Then they say this phrase, "Good will toward men." This has been under dispute for a long time, but the Greek experts that I looked into seem to agree that this phrase should really be translated: "Peace on earth among men of His good pleasure," not that God had good will toward all men, but that He was bringing peace and joy to those whom He had found grace with, whom He had given favor.

If you notice that at the end of the Passover sermon that He gave His disciples, Jesus said, "My peace I leave with you." Those were the only ones that could really have peace, because they were the ones that God had found favor with. There were 120 at the day of Pentecost in 31 A.D. They had found favor with God, and within days there were thousands who had been converted. Those were the ones that God had found favor with. Those were the ones who had peace, and can have peace. It is a fruit of the spirit of God—love, joy, peace.

We are the only ones that can really have this godly peace on earth right now, because, "To us a child has been born. To us a Son is given, and upon His shoulder will be the government and peace." Since we have attached our lives to His, we are then allowed to have peace through the Holy Spirit.

Remember that "Peace among men of His good pleasure." Those are the ones He has pleasure in. Jesus tells the little flock in Luke 12: 32: "Do not fear little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure, it is His divine favor, to bestow on you the kingdom." We are the ones who have this favor from God. This is a declaration to us that God is with us, just like He was with Mary. He is overshadowing us, and we can give then glory to God in the Highest for this wonderful, wonderful benefit and blessing.

Do not these passages mean so much more than just a silly Christmas pageant or a nativity scene out on the town common, or a catchy jingle? Is there not more to it than this?

What we have seen are elements of God's plan of the way He works that should strengthen our faith in Him and what He is doing. That should solidify our hope in the resurrection, because we know from hindsight now that not only did He bring His Son into the world by a virgin birth, but He guided Him through thirty-three and one-half years, allowing Him to die for the sins of all of us, and then allowed Him to stay in the tomb three days and three nights.

He then raised Him from the tomb—resurrected Him exactly when He said He would do it—and then that glorious holy One ascended to heaven and now sits at the right hand of God. He is the Head of the church. He is our High Priest. He is our soon coming King, and He has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you. I will bring you into My kingdom where I have prepared a mansion for you—a place for you."

Does that not build your faith? Does that not give you hope just knowing that the prophecies were fulfilled, just knowing that that Son of God—that Holy One (He is called) lived and gave us the example, and then died, and then was raised, and is now glorified and waiting, like those angels, for the word from God? "Can I go now and bring the kingdom to this earth, the reason I was born to be King, to be God?"

So as the angels sang to the shepherds in the field, "Glory to the Most High God who will bring peace to the earth among those He favors with His grace."