

Moments *for* You

Volume 68, Number 4

Theme: Nativity Scenes



THE NATIVITY

The nativity is one of the best-known stories in history. Asked to describe the events surrounding Jesus' birth, most people could probably give the basic components of the story: An angel tells a young virgin she's going to give birth to the Savior of the world.... Mary and Joseph travel to Bethlehem, but there's no room in the inn.... They find shelter in a stable where Jesus is born.... Angels announce the good news to a bunch of shepherds, who run to see the baby Jesus.... Some wise men come along later to pay their respects and leave some gifts.

That's the nativity story in a nutshell. But the truth is, the nativity is a massive and earth-shattering event, featuring characters both visible and invisible. It's so grand and so powerful that any attempt to portray it—whether a church play or a Hollywood blockbuster—fails to express what it meant for God to relate to His human creation the way He did.

The greatest human writer could never invent such a wondrous story. It came to us directly from the mind of God, who through the nativity announced several truths to the world:

- The weak will be made strong
- The lowly will be exalted
- The poor in spirit will become spiritually rich
- Those who mourn will be comforted
- Those who are meek will inherit the earth
- Those who desire a truly good life will find it

And it's all because Jesus came to the world on that first Christmas.

This is the heart of the nativity. It's a mystery revealed by God, centered in Christ, put into effect when the time was right. It's not a story to watch like an audience watches a play—we can actually join in ourselves, with the opportunity to participate in all that the story means. God didn't write the story for just anyone. When it's all said and done, He did it for you.

—From *God is in the Small Stuff at Christmas*. Copyright © Bruce Bickel and Stan Jantz. Published by Barbour Publishing, Uhrichsville, Ohio.

AN EARLY CHRISTMAS

I have done my share of grumbling about the way Christmas shopping seems to begin earlier every year. But, to be honest, in my own way I'm much worse than the advertisements and stores. I vote for an early Christmas. A very early Christmas.

ISAIAH

Isaiah would understand what I mean. He was a prophet seven centuries before the birth of our Lord. Isaiah watched his nation go through good times and bad, and with it all, he envisioned an utterly better day. *"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light"* (Isaiah 9:2).

And what is this great light? *"For to us a Child is born, to us a Son is given; and the government shall be upon His shoulder, and His name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace"* (Isaiah 9:6).

Isaiah's vision was of a government with a high God-content, with results that will go far beyond our usual political platforms. Isaiah was reaching into matters of heart and thought.

MICAH

Micah was a prophet at roughly the same time as Isaiah. We remember him for the words he spoke and wrote. Especially one verse that still thrills us more than twenty-five centuries later: *“But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for Me One who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days”* (Micah 5:2).

The little town of Bethlehem was uniquely significant to the Jewish people because their most revered king, David, had come from there. But now Micah was promising something far beyond David.

JOB

Job didn't celebrate Christmas, but he wanted its benefit, and he wanted it desperately. He lived in the land of Uz, and *“was the greatest of all the people of the east”* (Job 1:3). Job's greatness was not simply a matter of wealth and community standing. He was a truly fine human being, someone of whom God could say, *“there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man”* (Job 1:8).

Job seemed to live a charmed life. But suddenly it all changed. In a devastating series of events, Job lost his considerable fortune, his seven sons and three daughters, and his health. It seemed so hopeless to Job that he saw God as his enemy. Then Job turns to his friends, hoping they will understand his predicament with God, since they too are human: *“For He is not a man, as I am, that I might answer Him, that we should come to trial together. There is no arbiter between us, who might lay his hand on us both”* (Job 9:32,33).

In truth, Job's request is a pretty hopeless one. He wants a very special kind of mediator, someone with

enough standing to lay a hand on God, and enough understanding of our human condition to lay a hand on Job. Job was appealing for Christmas, the event that gives us the only One able to lay a hand on God because He is God, and understanding of humanity because He is human.

WHAT ABOUT YOU?

Are you ready for an early Christmas? Do you feel the need of One who will bring light to your dark world? One who has the authority to forgive your sins and the power to make you a new person?

Maybe, like Job, your life has taken a turn you didn't see coming. Perhaps you have lost the possessions, abilities, or relationships that meant the most to you. Let me assure you of one thing: God has not abandoned you! He loves you so much that He sent His only Son to die for you, and earnestly desires you to come to Him: *“God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us”* (Romans 5:8).

There is nothing we can do in our own efforts to make ourselves clean in God's sight. Jesus has paid the price we could never pay. All we need to do—all we can do—is turn to Him and trust what He has done. Won't you turn to Jesus Christ today? Then, no matter what time of year it is, you will receive the true Gift of Christmas!

“If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.... For ‘everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved’” (Romans 10:9-10,13).

—Adapted from *Christmas from the Back Side* by J. Ellsworth Kalas. Copyright © Abingdon Press.

CLOSE BUT NOT QUITE

“When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, ‘In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: “And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a Ruler who will shepherd My people Israel”’” (Matthew 2:3-6).

To their credit, these theologians—without even looking up the passages—spilled out the answer to Herod’s question. They knew the answer. But, notice this: not one of the chief priests and scribes leaves

Jerusalem to go to Bethlehem and see the Messiah who had come. These theologians were so captivated by their religious activity and adherence to the Law and their traditions that Jesus meant nothing to them. Their eyes were completely closed to the work of God right in front of their faces.

It’s hard to imagine this, but isn’t it so close to where we live our lives? This is a warning for us. Knowledge about God, religious activity, and tradition are no substitute for the reality of knowing Jesus personally as our Savior. Knowledge of the Bible and the things of God are worthless without a willingness to submit ourselves to the truth to which it points.

—Steve Muncherian

EIGHT CHRISTMAS CONTRASTS

1. Jesus underwent a human birth so that we who believe on Him might have a heavenly birth. (Luke 2:11; John 1:12)
2. Jesus took His place in a manger in a stable, so that we might have heavenly mansions. (Luke 2:7; John 14:2)
3. Jesus became a member of a human family so that we might become members of the family of God. (Matthew 2:11; Galatians 3:26)
4. Jesus made Himself subject to others so that we, through the power of His Spirit at work through us, might be made free. (Luke 2:51; Galatians 5:1)
5. Jesus laid His glory aside so that we might receive glory. (Philippians 2:6,7; 1 Peter 5:4)
6. Jesus became poor so that we might become spiritually rich. (Matthew 8:20; 2 Corinthians 8:9)
7. Jesus was born, to the praise of angels, so that we can be born again, to the praise of angels. (Luke 2:13,14; Luke 15:10)
8. Jesus, who was pursued by an evil and dangerous ruler, went to the cross to destroy a far more evil and dangerous ruler. (Matthew 2:13; Hebrews 2:14)

—Adapted from “The Contrasts of Christmas” by Donald Grey Barnhouse.



THE MEN WHO FOUND CHRISTMAS

One tragedy of the first Christmas is that so many came close to Christmas yet *missed* it all. There were the political leaders of the time, the innkeeper, Herod, and the religious leaders. But that is only half the story. The shepherds to whom the angels appeared while they were tending their sheep in the fields around Bethlehem *found* Christmas. And the wise men who saw the Messiah's star came to worship Him.

A MAGNIFICENT CONTRAST

It is hard to imagine a greater contrast than the one between those two groups of people. The shepherds were low. They were despised and mistrusted, and their ability to make off with things that did not belong to them was proverbial. They were not even allowed to bear testimony in a court of law. What about the wise men? Quite obviously they were at the other end of the scale. They were men of influence. We notice that when they came to Jerusalem looking for the one who had been born King of the Jews, they had no trouble gaining admission to Herod's palace. The shepherds would not even have been allowed in the outer courtyard.

I do not know how the story could say more clearly that Christ is for anyone who will have Him and that Christ is for you, whoever you may be. You may be unimportant in the eyes of most people or you may be very important. You may be poor or rich. You may be near Christ or far from Him. None of those things matters, for the simple reason that Jesus did not come to be the Savior of the rich or poor only, or the wise or foolish only, or any other group of people. He came to be the Savior

of the world, and that includes you!

A COMMON EXPERIENCE

The shepherds and wise men were different, yet their experience was similar, and speaks to us today.

First, they each received an announcement of Christ's birth. It was most spectacular in the case of the shepherds, for "the glory of the Lord shone around them" and an angel spoke to them (Luke 2:9-12). But was the announcement to the magi less significant from their perspective? The star was the kind of thing the wise men dealt with and was therefore well suited to them. Our experience is actually superior to theirs. We have received the Scriptures which are the very word of God, and are described to us as "a lamp shining in a dark place" (2 Peter 1:19).

Second, the shepherds and the wise men each obeyed God's summons. Can we imagine them refusing that unprecedented invitation? Perhaps. The magi lived a great distance from Jerusalem, and might have reasoned: "The way to Jerusalem is long. It would be a lot more convenient if we could just stay here." The shepherds, too, might have refused the invitation: "We are not dressed for the occasion. We have nothing to bring. Who will care for our sheep?" Neither the wise men nor shepherds did that. Instead of making excuses the shepherds said, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us" (Luke 2:15). I wonder if you have been as obedient to God. You know the story of Christmas. You even know the gospel of Jesus' death for sinners. You know the invitation of Christ: "Come to Me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). Have you obeyed God's summons?

That leads to the third step in the common experience of the shepherds and wise men. After they had each received the announcement and obeyed God's summons by going to Bethlehem, they found the Savior. They found that the words of the angel and the message of the star were not misleading. God's Son had been born. The Savior had come. That is no less true today, though people talk as if it were hard to find Christ. To talk like that is to suggest that God is lost and that it is up to us to find Him. We are the ones who are lost, He is not lost nor is the truth lost! Jesus said, "I am ... the truth" (John 14:6). Jesus is presented in Scripture. If you would find Him, you must search the Scriptures. As you do, pray that God will show you the truth.

—Condensed from *The Christ of Christmas* by James Montgomery Boice. Copyright © Linda M. Boice.

JOSEPH THE CARPENTER

"But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, 'Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit'" (Matthew 1:20).

Joseph's presence at Christ's birth witnesses to his triumph over the severe test that had befallen him. Mary was the pure young woman he was about to make his wife. But when it was evident that she was "with child" (Matthew 1:18), Joseph determined to leave her. But he waited upon God, and his love for and patience with Mary were rewarded with a direct revelation from God.

Awed by the mystery of it all, that his beloved had been chosen as the mother of his eagerly anticipated Lord, we can imagine how he would oversee every detail of the holy birth. Where suspicion regarding Mary's purity once lurked, faith now reigned as he looked into the lovely face of Mary's Child. At last God's promises had been fulfilled; before him was the Babe through whom God's covenants would be established.

—Condensed from *All the Men of the Bible* by Herbert Lockyer.

MARY

Of all the extraordinary women in Scripture, one stands out as the most blessed, most highly favored by God, and most universally admired by women. Indeed, no woman is more truly remarkable than Mary, the one chosen by God to be the instrument through which He would at last bring the Messiah into the world.

THE ANGEL'S ANNOUNCEMENT

We first meet Mary in Luke's gospel when the angel Gabriel appeared to her to disclose God's wonderful plan. At the time, Mary was probably still a teenager. It was customary for girls in that culture to be betrothed while they were still as young as thirteen. Scripture is very clear in teaching that Mary was still a virgin when Jesus was miraculously conceived in her womb. Luke 1:27 twice calls her a virgin, using a Greek term that allows for no subtle nuance of meaning.

The clear claim of Scripture, and Mary's own testimony, is that she had never been physically intimate with any man (v. 34). Although she knew the world was bound to think



otherwise, Mary weighed the cost against the immense privilege of becoming the mother of the Christ, and surrendered herself unconditionally, saying simply, “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38).

MARY’S RESPONSE OF WORSHIP

Mary, filled with joy and bubbling over with praise, hurried to the hill country to visit her beloved relative, Elizabeth. The angel had informed Mary about Elizabeth’s pregnancy, so it was a perfect situation for the two women to spend time rejoicing together in the Lord’s goodness.

Elizabeth’s immediate response to the sound of Mary’s voice gave Mary independent confirmation of all that the angel had said (Luke 1:41-45). Mary replied with her outpouring of praise known as the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55). Without question, it is the most wonderful psalm of worship in the New Testament, and is filled with messianic hope and scriptural language. It is clear that Mary’s young heart and mind were already thoroughly saturated with God’s Word.

THE SWORD THAT PIERCED HER SOUL

When Jesus was yet a newborn infant, His earthly parents took Him

THE STARS OF CHRISTMAS

There are two series of seven characters mentioned by name in the first chapters of Luke. Note the unlikely “stars” of the nativity.

ZACHARIAS, ELIZABETH, MARY, JOSEPH, SIMEON, ANNA, JOHN THE BAPTIST

The first seven are representative of the faithful ones among the people of God. Even though the world took no notice of them, they were very precious to God, and He appeared to them as “Immanuel” (which means, God with us)” (Matthew 1:23).

TIBERIAS CAESAR, PILATE, HEROD, PHILIP, LYSANIAS, ANNAS, CAIAPHAS

With the other seven we see the whole world in its might and glory. The Roman Emperor and the empire over which he ruled; the Roman governor and all Judea; Herod and his immoral court; Annas and Caiaphas and with them the apostate nation that would soon crucify its Lord. The world filled its books with the history, exploits, and achievements of these people, but God in His word gives them just one and one-half verses, while the other seven are found in one hundred and thirty-two verses.

The first seven are the stars of the Christmas story because of their attitude to His beloved Son. The second seven are all but ignored, because whoever does not know and love Christ is of no account in God’s sight.

—Adapted from *Meditations in Luke* by August Van Ryn.



to the temple to dedicate Him to the Lord. On that day, the little family encountered two elderly saints, Simeon and Anna. Simeon was an old man whom Scripture describes as “righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel” (Luke 2:25). The Spirit of God had revealed to Simeon that he would have the privilege of seeing the Messiah before he died. As soon as Simeon saw Jesus, he took the infant up in his arms. Then, turning to Mary, he told her, “Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel ... and a sword will pierce through your own soul also” (Luke 2:34-35). Years later, as Mary stood watching a soldier thrust a sword into Jesus’ side, she might well have recalled Simeon’s prophecy, and suddenly its true meaning came home to her with full force.

Mary was like no other mother. Godly mothers are typically absorbed in training their children for Heaven. Mary’s Son was the Lord of Heaven. Over time, she came to perceive the full significance of that truth, until it filled her heart. She became a disciple and a worshiper. The lowly perspective reflected in Mary’s Magnificat is the same simple spirit of humility that colored all her life and character. It is truly regrettable that religious superstition has, in effect, turned Mary into an idol. She is certainly a worthy woman to emulate, but Mary herself would undoubtedly be appalled to think that anyone would pray to her, or venerate images of her. Her life and her testimony point us consistently to her Son. *He* was the object of her worship. *He* was the one she recognized as Lord. Mary’s own example, seen in the pure light of Scripture, teaches us to do the same.

—Condensed from *Twelve Extraordinary Women*. Copyright © John MacArthur.

THE CHRISTMAS SPIRIT

“For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that ye through His poverty might be rich” (2 Corinthians 8:9).

It is here, in the thing that happened at the first Christmas, that the profoundest and most unfathomable depths of the Christian religion lie. “The Word became flesh” (John 1:14); the Almighty appeared on earth as a helpless human baby, unable to do more than stare and wriggle and make noises. The more you think about it, the more staggering it gets.

For the Son of God to empty Himself and become poor meant a laying aside of glory; a voluntary restraint of power; an acceptance of hardship, malice, and misunderstanding; finally, a death that involved agony—spiritual, even more than physical. It meant love to the uttermost for unlovely men. The Christmas message is that there is hope for a ruined humanity—hope of pardon, hope of peace with God, hope of glory—because Jesus Christ became poor and was born in a stable so that thirty years later He might hang on a cross. It is the most wonderful message that the world has ever heard, or will hear.

The Christmas spirit is the spirit of those who, like their Master, live their lives making themselves poor, spending and being spent, giving time, care, and concern to do good to others—and not just their own friends—in whatever way they see a need. There are not as many who show this spirit as there should be. If God in mercy revives us, one of the things He will do will be to work more of this spirit in our hearts and lives.

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