

THE BIRTH OF JESUS CHRIST, PART 1 **(SUNDAY, DECEMBER 19, 2010)**

SCRIPTURE READING: ISAIAH 9:1-7; LUKE 2:1-7

INTRODUCTION

We know that so much of the “Christmas Season” has almost nothing to do with the celebration of our salvation through the work of Christ. It is a shame that so much of our *busyness* is not more directed in worship and consideration of the great work of Christ.

We also know that our Puritan forefathers as late as Charles Spurgeon looked in horror on the celebration of Christmas especially in its connection with Roman Catholicism.

Our position as a church is not that we exalt the Sunday closest to Christmas as more important than other Sundays. But I think it is appropriate to give attention to the story of Christ’s incarnation and birth as found in Scripture. Last week our focus was directed to the miracle of the incarnation and Mary’s pregnancy through the work of the Holy Spirit – what is commonly called the Virgin Birth. Today and next Sunday, Lord willing, our focus will be in looking again at both Matthew and Luke and the parallel accounts they provide of the entire story of the incarnation and birth of Jesus Christ.

J. I. Packer has written, “The divine Son became a Jew; the Almighty appeared on earth as a helpless human baby, unable to do more than lie and stare and wriggle and make noises, needing to be fed and changed and taught to talk like any other child. The more you think about it, the more staggering it gets.”¹

Our main purpose in considering the birth of Jesus Christ is to again marvel and rejoice in the perfect plan of the Triune God to bring about our redemption and assert the sovereign rule of God over all the earth.

I would like us also to consider that the accounts of Matthew and Luke can be placed in harmony. The supposed scholars argue that not only are Matthew and Luke different but that they are also contrary. They tell us we must not think that the accounts are completely historical.² Further, we are advised to not even try to make the two accounts harmonize. Such is naïve and unscientific we are scolded.³ But those who are truly naïve and unscientific are those who exalt in the supposed wisdom of men, whose starting point is that man is the measure of all truth through his supposed infallible use of history and science.

Let us humble ourselves again before God’s Word, seeking to appreciate its beauty, detail, and purpose.

¹ *The Complete Gathered Gold.*

² Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 36.

³ J. Gresham Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, 191-192.

Last week I mentioned Machen's excellent book *The Virgin Birth of Christ* and his basic outline of Jesus' birth as given in Matthew and Luke. Today we will cover about half of this outline, the first 9 parts of the story.

1. ANNUNCIATION TO ZACHARIAS – LUKE 1:5-24

The account of Jesus' birth begins approximately 15 months before His birth and at least 6 months before the miracle of the incarnation. Luke 1:5 gives additional background information. Jesus was born during the rule of Herod the Great, the talented, boastful, murderous, and paranoid king of Judea. Herod the Great is commonly thought to have died in 4 B.C.⁴ This would place the birth of Christ as early as 6 B.C. However, others have argued that Herod died around 1 B.C. placing the birth of Christ in 3 B.C.⁵

One of the great themes found throughout Scripture is the birth of children. Over 40 times in Scripture we read of women conceiving a child and then later giving birth.⁶ This theme prepares the way for two great miracles – Elizabeth and Zacharias in their old age having a baby and the greatest of all miracles involving children, a virgin becoming pregnant.

The angel of Luke 1 is the angel Gabriel. Gabriel is one of the angels specifically named in Scripture.⁷ We first read of Gabriel in Daniel 8. Gabriel was sent to interpret Daniel's vision. Later we read of Gabriel speaking to Daniel the prophecy of the 70 weeks. Gabriel is likely one of the angels in Daniel 10.⁸ The book of Daniel is one of the most important books preparing the way for the coming of Jesus Christ. Very appropriately Gabriel was sent to two people in preparation for the birth of Christ.

King David with the assistance of Zadok and Ahimelech drew up 24 divisions of priests. Zacharias was of the division of Abijah, the 8th division according to 1 Chron. 24:10.⁹

Zacharias served two times each year as a priest but only once in a lifetime could a priest be chosen to burn incense in the Holy Place of the temple.¹⁰ Zacharias offered this sacrifice of incense as verse 10 states, at the hour of incense – either 9 a.m. or 3 p.m.¹¹

We should not be surprised that Zacharias was troubled seeing the appearance of Gabriel and that fear fell upon him. We have no idea how Gabriel would have looked appearing to him. **I think we would be right to believe that his presence was most impressive and awe inspiring.**

⁴ NET Bible note, s.v. Luke 1:5.

⁵ See for example the movie *The Star of Bethlehem* and Ernest Martin, *The Star That Astonished the World*.

⁶ The English word *conceived* is found 46x but not always in the contexts of children.

⁷ Some think Michael is not an angel but Jesus Christ. Does this agree with Revelation 12:7?

⁸ *NBD*, s.v. "Gabriel," 389.

⁹ NET Bible note, s.v. Luke 1:5.

¹⁰ NET Bible note, s.v. Luke 1:9.

¹¹ NET Bible note, s.v. Luke 1:9.

In verse 13 Gabriel told Zacharias that his prayer was heard. *What was he praying?* This was probably not the prayer of Zacharias concerning his desire to be a father. More likely this was Zecharias praying for the nation of Israel. God was going to answer that prayer in a mighty way by giving to him and to Elizabeth a son!

Zacharias and Elizabeth were to be filled with joy and gladness. Many others would rejoice with them in the birth of their son, John.

We are in no position to judge Zacharias but Scripture judged him with unbelief at the incredible words of Gabriel. Because of his unbelief, Zacharias was not to speak for at least another 9 months. This was a judgment but also a sign to others. Zacharias would not be able to give witness with his own words but this doesn't mean that many others didn't hear of what happened to him.

Miraculously Elizabeth was then able to conceive a child. For *five months* she hid herself. Elizabeth's disgrace had been removed. The Lord was gracious to her.

2. ANNUNCIATION TO MARY – LUKE 1:26-38

Six months into Elizabeth's pregnancy, Gabriel was sent on perhaps his most important mission. He was sent to the backwater town of Nazareth in Galilee, to a virgin named Mary, who was betrothed to a descendent of David, Joseph.

The account of Gabriel's appearance to Mary shares at least 9 similarities with Gabriel's appearance to Zacharias.¹²

We don't worship Mary as is essentially the case in the Roman Catholic Church. Attempts have been made by many to have the pope declare Mary a co-Mediator and even a co-Redeemer of Christ. Some even suggest that it is better to pray to Mary than to pray even to Jesus. Blasphemous!

But rightfully we see that Mary was given perhaps the greatest calling of any of God's people – to be the means that God used in bringing about the incarnation. No, Mary should never be called the Mother of God. That language is at best confusing and at worst blasphemous. But Mary was called to be the mother of Jesus; she held in her womb for 9 months the God-man. She had the incredible privilege of raising Jesus.

We should note the important words of verses 32 and 33 concerning our Lord Jesus.

He is the Son of the Most High – that is the Son of God. The Lord God was to give to him the throne of David. Jesus was the rightful heir to David's throne.

Rushdoony has written concerning these verses:

“At this point, churchmen hasten to tell us that this throne and kingdom are spiritual and have no reference to this world, except insofar as men are saved and enter the ark of the church. That the meaning includes a spiritual and an eternal frame of reference can be fully granted, and must be. But there is no ground for

¹² Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 83.

the exclusion of a reference to time and history. Plainly, Jesus Christ shall be lord and sovereign of the nations in terms of messianic prophecy. He comes to reclaim His realm, His property, as sovereign Lord.”¹³

“The earth is the property of Jesus Christ, because He is the messianic King, the very Son of God as well as the royal son of David.”¹⁴

Last week we looked at this text in part, so I will not go into great detail on the remaining verses, but we should consider the response of faith spoken by Mary as recorded in verse 38.

“Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word.”

Mary called herself a slave-woman. This was not a boast but a humble recognition of her position before the Lord. Yes, she was given an incredible privilege – one that was also a test of faith. Let it be to me according to your word!¹⁵

A proper celebration of the birth of Jesus involves humility and trust in God’s power.

3. VISIT OF MARY TO ELIZABETH – LUKE 1:39-55

As I mentioned last week, we don’t know how much Joseph and Mary were in contact with each other. Not long after Gabriel’s visit to Mary, Mary left Nazareth and traveled quickly some 70 miles south to the hill country around Jerusalem.¹⁶

Verse 41 is one of the great verses in Scripture which shows the humanity of babies in the womb. Here John leaped in his mother’s womb after Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting. Even in the womb, John recognized Jesus as the Son of God. Even in the womb, John was doing his work as the forerunner of Jesus.

The words of verse 43 also should be noted. Elizabeth recognized that Jesus was her Lord. “But why *is* this *granted* to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?”

How was Elizabeth able to speak this way? As verse 41 makes clear, she was filled with the Holy Spirit. She was given understanding that was not the result of human wisdom and ability.

Mary’s great song is worthy of our more detailed study which we do not have time for now. Consider that Mary was most likely a teenager when given an incredible assignment. Mary’s hymn of praise shows her considerable maturity, faith, and understanding. **Young men and women, there is encouragement even from**

¹³ Rushdoony, *Institutes of Biblical Law*, 493.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 494.

¹⁵ Joel Green notes that in antiquity the status of a slave was determined by the status of the householder. Green, 92.

¹⁶ Green, 94-95.

Mary that you be serious about living for Christ and understanding the Word of God.

Mary again demonstrates what is the most important attitude to have during this season – worship and humility before the Lord.

Mary dwells on the power, holiness, and mercy God. She is nothing herself before God.¹⁷

Verses 51-53 perhaps speak in a prophetic way declaring that God is the one who has and will show strength with His arm and scatter the proud in their imagination of their hearts. He will put down the mighty from their thrones and exalt the lowly. He will fill the hungry with good things and send away the rich empty. Mary understands the work of God in relationship to the past and His covenant promises to Israel.

And it is this hope that must be your foundation today. Time does not change the applicability of Mary's words or her hope. This season where in a special way we remember the birth of Jesus is a time for us to renew our hope in God's promises and faithfulness.

4. RETURN OF MARY TO NAZARETH – LUKE 1:56

Mary stayed with Elizabeth for approximately three months. It **seems** that Mary returned home before Elizabeth gave birth, however this is not explicitly stated. One commentator has written,

“From the time reference we should probably understand that Mary left soon after the birth of the child, but that since she plays no role in the birth and circumcision account to follow, **Luke finds it convenient from an artistic point of view to preserve the departure statement's original connection with the account of the visit.**”¹⁸

5. DISCOVERY OF HER CONDITION – MATTHEW 1:18-19

Again, we don't know all that we might like to know concerning how much contact or communication Joseph and Mary had. It is possible that while Mary was visiting Elizabeth for three months, Joseph came to hear of Mary's pregnancy. Joseph didn't initially know all that he needed to know which explains verse 19.

We read in verse 19 that Joseph was a just or a righteous man. He carefully sought to follow God's Law. Most common English translations read that **because** he was a just man, he did not want to make her a public example, but was minded to put her away secretly. And this is a very possible translation. But I think more likely, there should be a contrast in the verse.¹⁹ Joseph was just. He knew that the law required death for a woman

¹⁷ Leon Morris, *Luke: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 3 of Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. IVP/Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 93.

¹⁸ John Nolland, *Luke 1-9:20*, vol. 35A of Word Biblical Commentary. Accordance/Thomas Nelson electronic ed. (Dallas: Word Books, 1989), 74.

¹⁹ Both France and Hanger take this position in their translations.

who was guilty of adultery. Now because God's people were under Roman rule, the death penalty could not be applied and so divorce was the only option. And as a righteous man, he knew that he should divorce Mary in a public way so that the guilty party was openly shamed.²⁰ **Joseph was righteous, but Joseph was also merciful**, and so he wanted to divorce her not with a public ceremony but in a more private way, which was still legal under Jewish law. Joseph could have taken Mary to court and have taken her dowry and taken back any money that he had paid to her parents. But in contrast, he determined to give up any possible restitution and simply provide Mary a certificate of divorce in a much more private ceremony before only two or three witnesses.²¹

6. ANNUNCIATION TO JOSEPH – MATTHEW 1:20-23

But while Joseph thought on this plan or we could even read, after he had made up his mind to do this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream.²² Though nowhere in Scripture do we see this Joseph directly compared with the OT Joseph, certainly there are some comparisons, including the importance of dreams. In chapters 1 and 2, we see four times Joseph was given divine revelation through dreams. It was only in this way, that Joseph would be able to fulfill the incredible and also dangerous calling that he was given.

Here in this dream, Joseph is called appropriately as we have seen from the genealogy, son of David. And this is what is at stake in this part of the story. How is Jesus also the Son of David? The dream is very short, but it contained everything that he needed to know. Mary was not in any sin, and so Joseph was not to be afraid to take Mary, that is marry her. Don't divorce her but go ahead with the marriage. Further, that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. As we have noted before, the word conceived, is another form of the verb begot. She will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name, Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.

7. MARRIAGE OF JOSEPH AND MARY – MATTHEW 1:24-25

Obedience to the angel's message would not have been easy for Joseph. We are not told what other people in his family or village thought of him. Those who did not hear or did not believe what Joseph said would have thought that Joseph was responsible for Mary's pregnancy or would have looked down on him for marrying an unfaithful woman. His obedience would have been costly, but he chose obedience above the honor of men.²³

The angel of the Lord had specifically commanded that Joseph do two things – that he take Mary as his wife and that he name the child. And this we see Joseph doing. He immediately took Mary as his wife. But Matthew shows another thing that Joseph did. He did not know her that is he did not have marital relations with her until she had given

²⁰ France, 51.

²¹ Craig Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, 93-94.

²² France, 46, 52.

²³ Keener, 94-95.

birth to Jesus. Matthew here gives evidence again of the miraculous way that Jesus was conceived in Mary.

The angel Gabriel told Mary, “Rejoice, highly favored *one*, the Lord *is* with you; blessed *are* you among women!” Joseph was given also an incredible honor in adopting Jesus as his son. But the blessing that they enjoyed also involved a very difficult, costly, and even shameful calling.

8. JOURNEY TO BETHLEHEM BECAUSE OF THE CENSUS – LUKE 2:1-5

The historical background that Luke provides in the opening verses of chapter 2 have been called into question by countless commentators and supposed scholars. And there is a challenge in finding in secular histories correspondence with the details given here in Luke. But this doesn’t mean that we begin by assuming that Luke was not too sharp and is in error on his history.

Assuming that Jesus was born around 3 B.C. there is an explanation and reason for the census mentioned in Luke 2. The year 2 B.C. was one of the most important and glorious in the career of Augustus. It was the year of his silver Jubilee. He was awarded the empire’s highest honor – Father of the Country (*Pater Patriae*). This census may well have been in conjunction with an Empire-wide registration of loyalty to the emperor in preparation for the honor that was given to Augustus less than a year later.²⁴ Mary who also was of the line of David may well have been required to show allegiance to Roman rule by going with Joseph to Bethlehem.²⁵

The mention of this one Quirinius as governing Syria is also called into question. Records indicate clearly that he was not governor of Syria at the time of Christ’s birth. But we should consider that Luke doesn’t call Quirinius the governor. Rather Luke writes that Quirinius had a position of leadership and responsibility that he exercised from Syria.²⁶

Joseph had his home in Nazareth. He went to Bethlehem because he was of the house and lineage of David. There must have been some political reasons why it was necessary for him to travel south to Bethlehem, about 70 miles in direct distance. This was not simply a matter of taxation that led to Joseph and Mary travelling to Bethlehem.

We note that Luke calls Mary, Joseph’s betrothed wife. Joseph and Mary were already married, but Luke probably uses this term to show that they did not know each other in a marital way prior to the birth of Jesus.²⁷ Again Luke and Matthew are in perfect agreement.

9. BIRTH OF JESUS – LUKE 2:6-7

²⁴ Martin, 184-185.

²⁵ Martin, 185-186.

²⁶ NET Bible note: Or “was a minister of Syria.” This term could simply refer to an administrative role Quirinius held as opposed to being governor (Josephus, *Ant.* 18.4.2 [18.88])” NET Bible, s.v. Luke 2:2.

²⁷ Nolland, 104.

While in Bethlehem for this census or oath of loyalty the days were completed for her to be delivered. We note that the account of Jesus' birth, in the words of one commentator, is spare in the extreme.²⁸ Mary did what was usual for mothers. She wrapped baby Jesus in swaddling cloths. What follows is unusual – Jesus was then placed in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. This most likely was not a separate barn, though tradition has suggested a cave used for the shelter of livestock.²⁹ It is probably best to think of an overcrowded home in Bethlehem. A typical home was only a single room with an animal stall under the same roof but set apart from the main living area. The word **inn** doesn't have to refer to a small motel in Bethlehem, but it can refer to the living quarters of a single-room house.³⁰

This scene has been frequently romanticized in a variety of ways. Jesus deserved to be born in a beautiful palace. But even if he had been born in beautiful and clean palace, we would be right to marvel that the eternal Son of God took on human flesh. I don't think Luke has written this scene to pull on our heartstrings, but we are right in seeing here the humiliation that Jesus endured throughout his life. *Christmas is not cute!*

CONCLUSION

Let me briefly share several points of application.

1. God's glorious plan includes the obedience of His people and yet is greater and unexplainable in simply human terms.
2. Most of what is called a celebration of Christmas is of no value and honor to Jesus Christ. Endeavor to truly make this special time of considering Jesus' birth meaningful through worship, humility, thankfulness, and continued submission to God.
3. The victory of Jesus Christ – through the path of humiliation, obedience, and suffering.

Closing Hymn: 298

²⁸ Nolland, 104.

²⁹ Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), n.p.

³⁰ Nolland, 105.

Benediction – Hebrews 12:1-2

Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares *us*, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of *our* faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.