

The First Christmas: The Child

(Christmas 2021)

Scripture:

⁶While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born,⁷ and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them. (Luke 2:6-7)

⁶There was a man sent from God whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. ⁸He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.

⁹The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. ¹⁰He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. ¹¹He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. ¹²Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— ¹³children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God. ¹⁴ The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:6-14)

Do not think that I came to abolish the law or the prophets; I have not come to abolish them, but to fulfill them. (Matthew 5:17)

Message:

In Dr. Seuss' story, "How the Grinch stole Christmas!" the Grinch steals all of the Whos' Christmas gifts. He anticipates how distressed Whoville will be when they wake up and discover Christmas is gone. But as he listens for crying sounds, he is surprised to hear merry singing instead. The Grinch discovers that Christmas "means a little bit more" than just gifts.

We've discovered over the past few weeks that even the small details of this wonderful story of Christ's birth mean more than perhaps we realized. And the words we read this morning, are no doubt familiar.

Christmas is about the birth of a child.

An infant would change history, wrench the world's chronology so that its years would pivot about his birth, and touch countries, cultures, civilizations, and untold millions of lives. No one even comes close to Jesus in the opinion polls that ask, "Who is the most admired person in history?" (Winston Churchill is a very distant number two).

But, however people see him – either as a mere mortal man or as the Son the Most High God - there is no denying his life has affected the lives of more people than any other human being who has ever lived. His following is the single largest phenomenon in the history of the world – no other religion, philosophy, way of life, nation, or cause has ever commanded the loyalties of over a billion people – in a single generation.

The paradox is unprecedented. He taught publicly for only three and a-half years. He wrote no book, commanded no armies, invented no time-saving device. He had no religious, political, or business machine behind him; in fact, the religious, political and business authorities all seemed to oppose him—and yet, he became THE central figure in all of human history.

The book that chronicles his birth and the mere three and a half years of his public ministry has sold billions of copies and is available in almost every language.

It is a story we should know well - and as we've said - correctly.

THE EXAMINATION

Once again, we are going to test your Christmas knowledge.

1. An angel told Mary her unborn child's name should be called Jesus (**True or False?**)
2. An angel told Joseph that Mary's son should be called Jesus. (**True or False?**)
3. Which Gospel record traces Jesus' ancestry all the way back to Adam?

4. How many months after John the Baptist's birth was Jesus born? _____
5. Jesus was born of a virgin (**True or False?**)
6. Jesus is the only birth considered "miraculous" in the Bible (**True or False?**)
7. How many (half) brothers and sisters did Jesus have? _____

8. The only biblical story we have of Jesus' childhood is found in which gospel? _____
9. By Jewish law, Jesus had to learn a trade—i.e., some work he could do with his hands. (**True or False?**)
10. Jesus waited until he was thirty years old to begin his ministry because people in Jesus' day didn't trust anyone under thirty – especially on religious matters (**True or False?**)

B. Let's examine some of these questions and their answers together...

THE EXPLANATION

His **Story** begins with a promise back in **Genesis 3**. After Adam and Eve messed up, disobeyed God, and brought sin into the world, God, in his grace made a promise that provided humankind hope:

“And I will put enmity between you (the evil one) and the woman and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.”
(**Genesis 3:15**)

It is called the “mother promise.” It was the first of many promises and foreshadowings throughout the Old Testament. And then the New Testament dawns:

An angelic **announcement** is made to Mary and Joseph. An angel appears to an engaged virgin to announce that she will conceive a child by the Holy Spirit and his name will be Jesus. Joseph, her betrothed, when he discovers she is pregnant, plans to “*put her away quietly*” when an angel also appears to him, corroborates Mary's story, and tells him to still marry her. The Church has always honored this couple for their childlike faith and obedience.

Luke tells us of Mary's **visitation** to and blessing from Elizabeth. Mary went to visit her cousin Elizabeth who was already at least six months pregnant with John the Baptist - the forerunner of the Messiah (**Luke 1:26**). It was not only a way to escape the wagging tongues; Elizabeth would also serve as a mentor. Elizabeth blesses Mary (**Luke 1:45**) and encourages her for the times ahead.

Then comes the **nativity**, the actual birth of the Son of God in the **flesh**. Caesar Augustus decrees a census be taken, so Joseph takes Mary from the judging eyes of Nazareth to the little town of Bethlehem. While they were there, the Scripture says, the time came for the baby to be born, and Mary gave birth to a son, and they named him – as they had both been instructed - Jesus.

Then angels appear to shepherds out in the fields tending their sheep; after the birth is announced, the shepherds are **invited** to come and see Jesus as he lays in a manger. Shepherds, people known as thieves, scoundrels, and spiritually unclean, were the first invited to see the Christ, the lamb who would be slain for the sins of the shepherds...and the world. And then, like sheep following their shepherd, they hurry to Bethlehem to see what the angels had told them about.

Jesus' life (and death) is all about **fulfilling** the Law you and I couldn't keep.

"Do not think that I came to abolish the law or the prophets; I have not come to abolish them, but to fulfill them." (Matthew 5:17).

Jesus had to fulfill the law perfectly, so when the time came, he could be the perfect sacrifice, the perfect unblemished lamb required for the atonement of our sins and our reconciliation with the Father. So everything that happens – from being born in Bethlehem to the shedding of his blood - was done to fulfill the law (and the prophets). Having lived a perfect life, he would be the perfect sacrifice.

Here is the amazing and central truth of Christmas: the baby laying in the manger (feeding trough) is our sovereign Savior (the only one who can fully feed our soul) come to earth!

The birth of Christ is unlike any before or any since. While there are numerous "miraculous" births scattered throughout the Old Testament as a foreshadowing of Christ's birth, Jesus is the only baby ever born with a **pre-existent** life. Jesus' life didn't begin in Bethlehem—He always was.

The Gospels (and Paul) teach that Jesus came from heaven and gave up his place at the right hand of His Father, the creator and sustainer of the universe. We profess him to be one with the Father at creation, the second person of the Godhead, the logos (Word of God) in the flesh; the pre-existent one.

He is the only child conceived without an **earthly father**. His conception was, according to Scripture, supernatural, miraculous. One of the central and essential miracles of Jesus' birth is that Jesus was born to a virgin—a woman who had never "known" a man. This has become the theological bedrock of Christianity; an issue people will and have gone to the stake for (literally). (For others, it has been a stumbling block.) Without an earthly Father, Scripture reminds us we make no contribution to the forgiveness of our sins, toward our salvation, or to God's gift to us of eternal life.

Jesus is the only person ever born with both a (fully) **human** and (fully) **divine** nature. He was conceived by the **Holy Spirit**—making him fully **God**. He was born of a **woman**—meaning he shares her nature, making him fully

human. So he possesses all the essential properties of human nature, like us in every way - except for sin.

Jesus would claim his divinity. He said both subtly and overtly that he and the Father were one (**John 8:58; 10:30, 33**). But even more, he demonstrated his divinity and Lordship through his power to forgive, cast out demons, heal people's diseases, and teach with authority.

Jesus is the only child ever born without **sin** (**Hebrews 2:14-17; 4:15**). By Scriptural decree, everyone born of a woman is conceived and born in sin: *"Surely I have been a sinner from birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me."* (**Psalms 51:5**). But since Jesus Christ was conceived by the Holy Spirit, he was born free from every taint of sin.

THE ELUCIDATION

Let's check our answers:

1. An angel told Mary her unborn child's name should be called Jesus. (**True, Luke 1:31**)
2. An angel told Joseph that Mary's son should be given the name, Jesus. (**True; Matthew 1:21**)
3. Which Gospel record traces Jesus' ancestry all the way back to Adam? (**Luke 3**)
4. How many months after John the Baptist's birth was Jesus born? (**at least 6**) (**Luke 1:26**)
5. Jesus was born of a virgin. (**Matthew 1:18**)
6. Jesus is the only birth considered "miraculous" in the Bible (**False; Isaac, Samuel, Sampson, etc. are considered miracle births as well**).
7. How many (half) brothers and sisters did Jesus have (**At least six; four brothers named in Matthew 13:55 – James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas [Jude], and at least two unnamed sisters; cf. Matthew 13:56**)
8. The only biblical story we have of Jesus' childhood is found in which gospel? (**Luke; 2:41f**)
9. By law, Jesus had to learn a trade—i.e., some work he could do with his hands. (**True, Rabbis said, "Whoever fails to teach his son a craft, teaches him to steal."**)
10. Jesus waited until he was thirty years old to begin his ministry because people in Jesus' day didn't trust anyone under thirty – especially on religious matters. (**That is actually True**).

Most worshippers on Christmas are not focused on the Gospel's back-story. At Christmas, people are less interested in analyzing Matthew's message than in celebrating it, less concerned about parsing Luke's sentiments than in singing them, less interested in analyzing John's unique introduction of Jesus, and more interested in embracing the simple truth that God came to be with us in the flesh. **The amazing thing about Christmas is we have heard from God!** We can know that we are **loved**. We can be forgiven. We can lean into hope. All because of a child, born to a virgin in peasant's home in a little sheep town. He was Messiah – the King of kings and the Lord of lords. He would change the destiny of the world and everyone who follows him.

As Matthew, Luke and John were all aware, it is not enough to just have heard the **Gospel**; we need to hear the joyous story in our heart; our mind must step back and marvel in awe, and our soul must embrace this gracious gift of God – we need to respond to it with our **life**.

I think even Jesus did; I imagine his mother telling him the story of his birth over and over – as mothers tend to do: the story of the angelic appearances to his mother and Joseph; the story of angels in the hills near Bethlehem; the story of adoring shepherds and humbled wise men who came to visit. Here it is again:

*“The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel”—which means, “**God with us.**” (Matthew 1:23)*

Christ's coming to dwell on earth is both a picture of God's ultimate goal (God with us always) and God's means of accomplishing that goal (Jesus in the flesh). In Christ, God (himself) came and walked, talked, laughed and cried with his people, and showed us His great love. By coming to die for our sins, God entered the world of human experiences, and became intimate with his people in the depths of life's pain and sorrow.

The nativity is about Almighty God **sending** His one and only **Son** down to this earth. This is His gift to us, not just for Christmas, but for **eternity**. He doesn't want us to simply acknowledge His gift. He doesn't want us to simply admire it, any more than we would just admire a gift given from a loved one - and then set it aside as so many have. God wants us (everyone) to accept His gift of reconciliation and eternal life through Jesus Christ, by receiving Him as our Savior from sin and by making him Lord of our life.

Jesus would one day ask his disciples the essential question of life: *“Who do you say I am?”* People have answered that in a myriad of ways – and, because of who Jesus is, their answer marks the difference between life and death. Who do you say Jesus is?

A heavy-hearted postal worker noticed a letter addressed to God while sorting mail. The return address was his house - 302 Walnut Street. The letter was from his daughter. Curiosity got the best of him. He opened it and began reading:

Dear God. We are very sad at our house this Christmas. Little Charlie, my three-year-old brother, went to heaven last month. If you could give my daddy something that would make him stop crying all the time, it would be the best thing you could do for me. I heard him tell mommy that only eternity could cure him. Could you please send him some of that? Love, Marian.

That's why Jesus came - God sent him to give us **eternity so in the midst of our pain, we can stop crying.**

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