

Days of Christmas

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Why Christ Came

“Then said I, Lo, I come: in the volume of the book it is written of me, I delight to do thy will, O my God: yea, thy law is within my heart.” (Psalm 40:7-8)

Although these words were written by David, they go far beyond any of his own experiences. By divine inspiration, he was penning the very words of the coming Messiah, whose coming into the world had been already written down in God’s eternal Word. These words were later quoted as Messianic by the writer of Hebrews. “Then said I, Lo, I come (in the volume of the book it is written of me,) to do thy will, O God” (Hebrews 10:7). Thus, the basic reason why the infinite God became man at the incarnation was that this was the will of the triune God, planned before the foundation of the world (note 1 Peter 1:18-19).

But then the Lord Jesus elaborated the human implications of His coming in many other wonderful ways. For example, He said concerning His mission: “The Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost” (Luke 19:10). All of us were lost sinners, deserving only to be rejected by God, but He came to save us from our sins.

And that salvation not only included forgiveness of sins, but also the gift of eternal life. “I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world” (John 6:51).

Furthermore, this everlasting life begins the moment we “eat of that bread,” by faith believing in His name and receiving His gift, and this transaction results in a changed life here on earth. “I am come,” He said, “that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly” (John 10:10). “For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved” (John 3:17).

A Light to the Gentiles

*“And he said, It is a light thing that thou shouldest be my servant to raise up **the** tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved of Israel: I will also give thee for a light to the Gentiles, that thou mayest be my salvation unto the end of the earth.”*
(Isaiah 49:6)

These words were presumably directed to the Son by the Father as the Triune God prepared to implement the ancient promise that a Savior would come to bring salvation to a world lost in sin. That salvation would not only be the restoration of Israel as God’s elect nation, but also would reach the Gentile nations and spread to the ends of the earth.

The old prophet Simeon referred to this prophecy when he took up the infant Jesus in his arms, and said: “Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, . . . For mine eyes have seen thy salvation, Which thou hast prepared before the face of all people; A light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel” (Luke 2:29-32).

Similar prophecies occur in other Old Testament passages as well. “I the LORD have called thee in righteousness, and will hold thine hand, and will keep thee, and give thee for a covenant of the people, for a light of the Gentiles” (Isaiah 42:6). “Arise, shine; for thy light is come, and the glory of the LORD is risen upon thee. . . . And the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising” (Isaiah 60:1, 3). The latter verse apparently prophesies even the coming of the Magi to worship the child Jesus in Bethlehem.

Paul used this truth as he preached to Gentiles in Antioch and elsewhere. “So hath the Lord commanded us, saying, I have set thee to be a light of the Gentiles, that thou shouldest be for salvation unto the ends of the earth” (Acts 13:47; also note Acts 26:23). In fact, Jesus not only enlightens both Jews and Gentiles, but is “the light of the world” (John 8:12).

God's Son in the Old Testament

I will declare the decree: the LORD hath said unto me, Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee.” (Psalm 2:7)

There are many today (especially Muslims, Jews, and Christian “liberals”) who are monotheists, believing in one supreme God but rejecting the deity of Christ. They argue that the doctrine that Jesus was the unique Son of God was invented by the early Christians and that the God of the Old Testament had no Son. Orthodox Jews in particular emphasize Deuteronomy 6:4: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD”

The fact is, however, that there are a number of Old Testament verses that do speak of God's only begotten Son. Note the following brief summary. First, there is God's great promise to David: “I will set up thy seed after thee,...I will be his Father, and he shall be my son....thy throne shall be established for ever” (2 Samuel 7:12, 14, 16).

Consider also the rhetorical questions of Agur. “Who hath established all the ends of the earth? what is his name, and what is his son's name, if thou canst tell?” (Proverbs 30:4).

Then there are the two famous prophecies of Isaiah, quoted so frequently at Christmastime. “Behold, a [literally ‘the’] virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel [meaning ‘God with us’]” (Isaiah 7:14). “For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: . . . and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6).

Perhaps the most explicit verse in this connection is our text. “The LORD bath said unto me, Thou art my son” (Psalm 2:7). Then this marvelous Messianic psalm concludes with this exhortation. “Kiss the Son, . . . Blessed are all they that put their trust in him” (Psalm 2:12).

The Eternally Begotten Son

“When there were no depths, I was brought forth; when there were no fountains abounding with water. Before the mountains were settled, before the hills was I brought forth.” (Proverbs 8:24-25)

It is unfortunate that many modern Bible translations (RSV, NIV, NEB, and others) dilute such key verses as John 3:16 by changing “only begotten Son” to merely “only son.” This makes the Bible contradict itself, for Jesus was not the only Son of God. Adam is called “the son of God” (Luke 3:38), angels are called “sons of God” (Job 1:6), and, in fact, all believing Christians are called “sons of God” (John 1:12).

But Jesus was the only *begotten* Son of God! The Greek word is *monogenes*, clearly meaning “only generated” or “only begotten.” The word is used only six times in the New Testament (John 1:14; 1:18; 3:16; 3:18; Hebrews 11:17; 1 John 4:9). Five of these refer to Jesus. One refers to Isaac as Abraham’s only begotten son (Hebrews 11:17), indicating him as a type of Christ. The first (John 1:14) is a favorite Christmas verse telling us that the eternal “Word was made flesh. and dwelt among us ... the glory as of the only begotten of the Father.” The last (1 John 4:9) is also a beloved Christmas verse, reminding us that “God sent his only begotten Son into the world.” This verse tells us also that He was God’s only begotten Son *before* He came into the world.

But just *when* was He begotten of the Father?

Our text for the day, speaking of the divine wisdom, tells us that He was “brought forth” before there were any hills or mountains or depths or fountains. In fact, He says, “The LORD possessed me in the beginning of his way . . . I was set up from everlasting” (Proverbs 8:22-23).

No wonder the old theologians spoke of Him as the *eternally* begotten Son. And it was this Son whom the Father gave, that we might have everlasting life!

Wonderful Counsellor

“For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.” (Isaiah 9:6)

This magnificent verse, used so often on Christmas cards, is a splendid prophecy of the divine/human nature of the coming Messiah. He would be born as a child, like every other human being, but He would also be given as a Son at the same time, with the giver clearly being God Himself. “He gave his only begotten Son” (John 3:16).

The name of this God/man offers further testimony. At the introduction of this prophecy, God had named Him Immanuel, meaning “God with us” (Isaiah 7:14). Now He is given a series of names, all of which are needed to express His full identity. It is likely the first two names should be considered one name: He is our “Wonderful Counsellor” (the punctuation marks have been added to our translations, but the combined term is more in keeping with the structure of the other names).

This “child,” amazingly, is also “The mighty God” and “The everlasting Father,” stressing His absolute and eternal deity, as well as His omnipotence and the unity of the Father and the Son in the Triune Godhead. Finally, as “The Prince of Peace,” it is only He that can unite the warring factions of mankind and bring true world peace. This stresses His humanity, but also His perfect and effective humanity.

Also, in His human nature, He is our “Wonderful Counsellor,” our perfect Example and infallible Teacher. He both shows and tells us what to believe and how to live, and He is never wrong, for in Him “are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge,” and “in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily” (Colossians 2:3, 9).

Signs of Christmas

“Moreover the LORD spake again unto Ahaz, saying, Ask thee a sign of the LORD thy God; ask it either in the depth, or in the height above.”
(Isaiah 7:10-11)

Although “the Jews require a sign” (1 Corinthians 1:22), and this attitude was rebuked by Christ when He said that “an evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign” (Matthew 12:39), God has given three specific signs with respect to the incarnation of Christ. There were other signs too, no doubt, such as the star of Bethlehem, but three events were specifically called signs.

First, to the unwilling King Ahaz, He said: “Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel” (Isaiah 7:14). Immanuel means “God with us,” and the sign of the Virgin Birth, biologically impossible without a mighty miracle of divine creation, assures us that the omnipotent God has entered the human family once for all.

That entrance was not made in an emperor’s palace as a great conqueror, however, but in the very humblest of human circumstances, and this also was a sign. “And this shall be a sign unto you,” said the leader of the angelic host; “Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger” (Luke 2:12).

And there was a third sign. When the infant Jesus was brought to the temple, the aged prophet Simeon said: “Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel; and for a sign which shall be spoken against . . . that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed” (Luke 2:34-35).

That is, the God/man would Himself be God’s great sign to Israel and the whole world. The attitude of men and women to God, in Christ, would reveal the state of their hearts and seal their eternal destiny, whether rising again to everlasting life or falling forever away from God.

God Gave Himself

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”
(John 3:16)

It is singularly appropriate that we look at this greatest of all verses at Christmastime, for it records the greatest of all gifts. The theme of giving is very prominent in the Bible, with such words as “give,” “gift,” “gave,” etc., occurring more than 2,100 times. The first is Genesis 1:16-17 when God created the sun, moon, and stars “to give light upon the earth,” and the last is Revelation 22:12 when Christ will return with His rewards to “give every man according as his work shall be.” “He ... gave us rain from heaven, and fruitful seasons,” as well as “life, and breath, and all things” (Acts 14:17; 17:25).

But the greatest gift, clearly, was when God gave Himself for a lost and undeserving world. It was the greatest gift because it met the greatest need, revealed the greatest love, and had the greatest scope and purpose of any gift that could ever be conceived in the heart of an omniscient Creator.

That was not the end of His giving, of course. “He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?” (Romans 8:32). “Trust . . . in the living God, who giveth us richly all things to enjoy” (1 Timothy 6:17).

This great gift of God is abundantly sufficient to provide salvation and everlasting life for the whole world. But a gift only becomes a gift when it is accepted, and the greatest of all tragedies is that this greatest of all gifts has been spurned and even ridiculed, or—worst of all—simply ignored by multitudes who need it so much. When they brazenly refuse God’s free gift of everlasting life, they can only perish in everlasting death. God did all He could do when He gave His Son; for when He gave His Son, He gave Himself.

Christ in the Flesh

“Hereby know ye the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God.” (1 John 4:2)

The great truth associated with Christmas is the glorious fact of the incarnation. that the eternal Word of God, without whom “was not any thing made that *was* made” (John 1:3), “was made flesh, and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). The Bible warns, therefore, that anyone who denies the human nature of Christ “is not of God” but rather is of the “spirit of antichrist” (1 John 4:3).

This problem is very real because “many false prophets are gone out into the world” (1 John 4:1)—that is, those “New Age” teachers, gurus, rabbis, and mullahs who deny that Jesus and the Christ are eternally one, and that the Lord Jesus Christ died for our sins and rose again, and that this was a physical death and bodily resurrection.

The real message of Christmas is not about a baby or gift-giving or good will, though these elements are all there, but about the God/man, who once came “in the likeness of sinful flesh” to die in our place, and thereby “condemned sin in the flesh” (Romans 8:3). It will not do to say that any person can become a “Christ” or any other compromise that dilutes either the humanity or the deity of the Lord Jesus Christ. As the apostle John testified: “For the life was manifested, and we have seen it, and bear witness, and shew unto you that eternal life, which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us” (1 John 1:2).

That living Word of God “was made in the likeness of men: . . . and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, . . . That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, . . . every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:7-11).

Out of the Ivory Palaces

"All thy garments smell of myrrh, and aloes, and cassia, out of the ivory palaces, whereby they have made thee glad." (Psalm 45:8)

Psalm 45 is one of the Messianic psalms, quoted as such in Hebrews 1:8-9. The section so quoted (w. 6-7), which immediately precedes our text, begins with one Person of the Godhead addressing the Messiah also as "God," whose throne is eternal. Then, He says, "Oh God, . . . thy God, hath anointed thee with the oil of gladness above thy fellows." The "oil of gladness" was the holy oil used for the anointing of priests and kings and was compounded of a mixture of spices which included myrrh and cassia (Exodus 30:22-25). Since the Messiah had been anointed to be "above his fellows" (first as High Priest, then as King of kings), "all his garments" would bear the sweet aroma of the holy ointment.

At the birth of Christ, His garments were "swaddling clothes," and the gifts of the eastern wise men included a supply of myrrh and frankincense (Luke 2:7; Matthew 2:11). At His death, they gave Him to drink "wine mingled with myrrh [and] . . . parted his garments" (Mark 15:23-24). Then once again His body was wrapped in linen clothes and anointed with myrrh and aloes (John 19:39-40) for His burial.

The psalmist sees Christ (i.e., "Messiah," both Greek and Hebrew titles meaning "the Anointed One") emerging triumphantly from the "ivory palaces." These mansions with their ivory walls and pearly gates are of shimmering white beauty in the distant heavenly city which will someday descend to earth (Revelation 21:2, 10-21).

The Lord descended once from these ivory palaces to take on human flesh in Mary's womb, thence to a burial in Joseph's tomb. But someday He will again come forth, anointed as eternal King, and then "shall the people praise thee for ever and ever" (Psalm 45:17).

The Incarnation

“For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh.” (Romans 8:3)

The great truth of Christmas (meaning, originally, “Christ-sent”) is that “God was manifest in the flesh” (1 Timothy 3:16). The eternal Word “was made flesh, and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). So vital is this truth that “every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God: and this is that spirit of antichrist” (1 John 4:3).

Jesus Christ is the God/man—infinite God and perfect man, perfectly joined *in* full union, and salvation is based on this truth. If Jesus Christ were not perfect man, He could not die for the sins of man; if He were not God, He could not defeat death and save us from the penalty of sin.

He could not be born in sinful flesh, of course, like all the descendants of Adam, but only in the “likeness” of sinful flesh. From the moment of conception, He must be “holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners” (Hebrews 7:26), and thus miraculously conceived in a virgin’s womb.

In fact, that miraculous creation of His body in the womb of Mary was the actual moment when God became man. It is even possible that the incarnation took place on about the very night that we now call Christmas, since it is probable that Jesus was actually born in the early fall, when shepherds were in the field with their sheep. It may even have been on Michaelmas (“Michael sent”), the fall holiday on September 29 honoring the angel who with the heavenly host announced the birth of Jesus on that night long ago. How appropriate it would be if “the light of the world” had indeed come into the world on or near that world’s longest night just nine months before.

Made of a Woman

But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law.” (Galatians 4:4)

This is a key verse related to the incarnation, and therefore to the whole plan of salvation. The promise was made in the very beginning, when God promised that the seed of the woman would bring salvation from sin and Satan (Genesis 3:15). But it would be at least four thousand years before God’s “fulness of the time was come.”

But, right on God’s schedule, He came, miraculously conceived and born of “a [literally ‘the] virgin” (Isaiah 7:14). Paul, carefully choosing his words, says He was “made of a woman.” The word rendered “made” (Greek *ginomai*) is not the usual word for “born” (*gennao*). Paul did not say He was born of a woman, but made of a woman, evidently to emphasize that the human birth of Jesus was unique different from all other human births. In fact, His human body had to be specially “prepared” by God (Hebrews 10:5) so that He could be born without either an inherent sin-nature or any inherited genetic defects from either parent. In order to “redeem them that were under the law” (Galatians 4:5), the Son must Himself be ‘without blemish and without spot” (1 Peter 1:19).

Not only was He “made of a woman” so as to be without inherited sin, but He was “made under the law” so that He could be shown to live without committing sin. It is only through God’s written law that we really know what sin is. “By the law is the knowledge of sin” (Romans 3:20). And we know that we cannot possibly “keep the whole law” (James 2:10).

But Christ did! Therefore, since He was “made under the law” and had come “to fulfill” the law (Matthew 5:17), He can indeed redeem every sinner who will come to Him in repentance and faith.

The Bringing Forth

“Therefore will he give them up, until the time that she which travaileth hath brought forth: then the remnant of his brethren shall return unto the children of Israel.” (Micah 5:3)

This enigmatic verse must be understood in the light of its context. The verse preceding it is the great Christmas verse: “Thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, . . . out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting” (v. 2).

Then the verse following says: “And he shall stand and feed in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his nod; and they shall abide: for now shall he be great unto the ends of the earth” (v. 4).

There was a babe born in Bethlehem who has been “going forth” forever. He is also to “come forth” unto God, but not until a woman in travail has “brought forth.” Once He does come forth, He is to restore and rule Israel, yet be great unto the ends of the earth.

Isaiah, a contemporary of Micah, also prophesied concerning this great event. “Behold, [the] virgin shall conceive, and bear a Son, and shall call his name Immanuel [God with us]” (Isaiah 7:14). “For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: . . . and his name shall be called . . . The mighty God, The everlasting Father . . .” (Isaiah 9:6). These great prophecies are amplifications of God’s primeval promise of the coming divine/human “seed of the woman,” who someday would crush the head of the great serpent (Genesis 3:15).

Ever since Eve, “she which travaileth” (text) must “bring forth children” in sorrow (Genesis 3:16), and the “mighty God,” whose “goings forth have been from everlasting,” must become a child, “made of a woman” (Galatians 4:4), destroying the serpent so that all who trust in Him “shall abide” forever.

Mary and the Grace of God

“And the angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favour with God” (Luke 1:30).

This announcement by the angel Gabriel to the virgin Mary, that she had been chosen as the mother of the coming Savior, contains the first mention in the New Testament of the Greek word for “grace” (*charis*). Mary was chosen, not for anything she had done, but because she had “found grace.”

In a remarkable parallel, certainly implying divine inspiration, the first mention of “grace” in the Old Testament is also associated with the coming of a new dispensation in God’s dealings with men. “But Noah found grace in the eyes of the LORD” (Genesis 6:8).

Just as Mary found grace, so Noah had found grace. Grace is not something one earns or purchases; grace is a treasure that is found! When a person—whether Noah or Mary or someone today—finally realizes that salvation is only by the grace of God, received through faith in the saving work of Christ, he or she has made the greatest discovery that could ever be made, for it brings eternal life.

But there is an even greater dimension to the grace of God. When we do “find” grace, it is actually because God in His infinitely precious grace has found us, and revealed to us the Savior of our souls. Just as God found Moses in the desert, and found Paul on the road to Damascus, then saved and called them to His service, so He finds us, and then we also find His saving grace.

Mary’s discovery of God’s grace in salvation, through the coming of the “seed of the woman” into the world, is revealed in her Magnificat. “My soul doth magnify the Lord, And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour” (Luke 1:46-47). This could well have also been the testimony of Noah long ago, and it surely should be the testimony of each of us who has found grace today.

The Virgin Birth

Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us.” (Matthew 1:22-23)

The apostle Matthew is in this passage citing God’s great prophecy in Isaiah 7:14. “Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.” In this verse, the Hebrew word for “virgin” is *almah*, and a number of Bible versions have translated this simply as “young woman,” thereby supporting those many theological liberals who deny the virgin birth of Christ.

Some commentators have tried to find modern parallels, in such processes as artificial insemination, parthenogenesis, and others, but there has never been any other true virgin birth recorded in all human history. The skeptics seem to have a point when they say it would be impossible.

Matthew’s quote, however, denies all such ideas, for he translated *almah* by the Greek word *parthenos*, which never could be used for anyone other than a virgin. Mary and Joseph, of course, understood and believed it that way. So did Paul, who said that “when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman” (Galatians 4:4). No man had anything to do with it! As the angel told Joseph: “that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost” (Matthew 1:20).

The conception and birth of Jesus did, indeed, require a mighty and unique miracle. But how else could the infinite God ever become a man? “Without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh” (1 Timothy 3:16). He became “God with us,” and He is still the man in the glory! We can never comprehend such a miracle, but we can believe it, and rejoice!

The Babe in Bethlehem

But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting.” (Micah 5:2)

This is a very remarkable prophecy, explicitly predicting that the future King of Israel would be born in the little village of Bethlehem some 700 years before He finally came. Then, to assure its fulfillment, the great Emperor Augustus had to decree a comprehensive census, compelling Joseph to take Mary with him to Bethlehem for her child to be born.

That the prophecy involves an actual birth is clear, not only from the phrase “come forth,” but also from the succeeding verse which warns that God will “give them up, until the time that she which travaileth hath brought forth” (v. 3). The preceding verse had also predicted that “they shall smite [this coming ruler] the judge of Israel with a rod upon the cheek” (v. 1), speaking of His initial rejection and execution.

But that is not all. The prophecy not only foresees His birth in Bethlehem, His repudiation by His own people, and His eventual installation as King over all Israel (not merely Judah), but also that this same remarkable person was none other than God Himself! His “goings forth” had been “from everlasting.” That is, He is eternally proceeding forth from His Father. He did not become God’s Son when He was born in Bethlehem; He has been coming forth eternally.

There is still another truth implied in the remarkable Hebrew word for “goings forth.” It is also used for such things as the flowing of water from a fountain or the radiations from the sun. Thus, the never-ending flowing forth of power from God through the Son is nothing less than the sustaining energy for the whole creation, as He is “upholding all things by the word of his power” (Hebrews 1:3). And this was the Babe in Bethlehem!

Shepherds in the Field

“And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.” (Luke 2:8)

The date of Christ’s birth, as observed in the western world, is December 25. although other dates have been observed at various times and places—in January, March, May, etc. Actually no one really knows. In fact, the church did not observe it at all for the first two centuries. The date in late December which was eventually adopted coincided with the various pagan festivals held in connection with the winter solstice.

A significant clue is found in our text. Shepherds were almost certainly not abiding in the fields watching over their flocks in late December; the sheep would have been gathered into the sheep folds long before that.

Another clue is the recorded presence of “the angel of the Lord” (v. 9) to announce the birth of the Savior, along with a “multitude of the heavenly host” (v. 13). The angel leading the host was likely Michael the archangel (note Jude 9). The angel Gabriel, who stands “in the presence of God” (Luke 1:19), was sent to bear individual messages to Zacharias and Mary (Luke 1:11, 26-27), but Michael is the one seen commanding the angelic host (Revelation 12:7).

It may be significant that the ancient church in Britain observed a date called Michaelmas (i.e., “Michael sent”), known as the feast of Michael and the angels. This date (still recognized in England’s legal system) is September 29—a date when it is reasonable that Jewish shepherds would be in the fields with their flocks. Now, if that just might be the date of Christ’s birth, then December 25 (nine months earlier) could well be the real date of the incarnation, when the eternal Creator God left heaven to take up residence as a special “seed” in a virgin’s womb!

Joy to the World

And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.” (Luke 2:10)

When God became man, and Jesus was born, true joy entered a world of sin and sadness. The Magi, who had been long anticipating the Savior’s coming, “rejoiced with exceeding great joy” when they saw the star standing over the young Child (Matthew 2:10). This is the first mention of “joy” in the New Testament.

The heavenly host also rejoiced as their angelic captain shared with the shepherds in the field at Bethlehem the “good tidings [that is, the gospel] of great joy.” The very gospel we are to preach is a gospel of exceeding joy, because we have a Savior to preach—Christ the Lord!

Although He was “a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief” (Isaiah 53:3), the Lord Jesus “for the joy that was set before him endured the cross” (Hebrews 12:2). He prepared His disciples for His coming death and their own subsequent sufferings for His name’s sake by conveying to them His own joy. “These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full” (John 15:11). He prayed for them to the Father, “that they might have my joy fulfilled in themselves” (John 17:13). He promised to answer prayers offered to the Father in His name “that your joy may be full” (John 16:24).

Thus it is that all who truly believe on Christ can testify with Peter that even though “now [we] see him not, yet believing, [we] rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory” (1 Peter 1:8). Even when suffering for Him, Christians know that “when his glory shall be revealed, [we] may be glad also with exceeding joy” (1 Peter 4:13), for His Word promises that He will “present [us] faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy” (Jude 24).

When the Angels Worshiped Christ

“And again, when Iw bringeth in the first begotten into the world, he saith, And let all the angels of God worship him.” (Hebrews 1:6)

Jesus Christ is “the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father” (John 1:18), but the day finally came when He had to enter humankind, and the eternal Word “was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). By eternal generation, by the incarnation, by the virgin birth, and by the resurrection, He is in every sense God’s “first begotten”—His only begotten—Son.

Our text says that when He first entered the world, born of the virgin, His heavenly Father called on all the innumerable angels in the heavenly host to bow down and worship Him. It is not clear whether this command is a quotation from the Old Testament or not, although it is cited in a passage which also quotes several other Messianic prophecies as applied to Jesus Christ. Psalm 97:7 and Deuteronomy 32:43 have been suggested as possible source verses, but neither of these seems to fit very well in context. Thus, it may be that our text refers directly, and solely, to a specific decree of God, proclaimed throughout the universe at the time of the human birth of His Son, and recorded here alone. All the angels of the infinite cosmos bowed in solemn worship, but a special contingent was commissioned to watch directly over the birth, and proclaim the good news to those nearby. “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” (Luke 2:13-14). The angels saw and worshiped; the shepherds heard and told. And “all they that heard it wondered” (Luke 2:18).

Good News/Bad News

When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy.”

(Matthew 2:10)

The familiar story of Herod and the wise men illustrates how news of the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ so effectively separates people into two great companies: the “Gospel” of Christ means, literally, “good news,” but most people, sad to say, react as though it were bad news.

When the “wise men from the east” came searching for the newborn Savior, this glorious news was received badly, right where it should have been received most gladly. “When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him” (Matthew 2:3). The Jewish leaders were equally unresponsive, who, knowing the prophetic promises, could tell the king where Christ would be born (Matthew 2:5-6), but they were merely “troubled” along with others in Jerusalem. Neither Herod nor the Jewish leaders were glad for the news, and neither would join in looking for the Savior. Later, they all tried to slay Him.

The wise men, on the other hand, “rejoiced with exceeding great joy” (text) when they found Him, and then “they departed into their own country another way” (v. 12), no doubt with lives changed as well as itineraries.

One’s attitude of heart is all important. Those who proclaim Christ encounter two reactions: “To the one we are the savour of death unto death; and to the other the savour of life unto life” (2 Corinthians 2:16).

Some, like Herod, react with fear and hatred, setting about to destroy the Gospel by persecution. Others, in the scholarly community, like the priests and scribes, seem to react with learned indifference but, when confronted more directly with their own hypocrisy, also eventually resort to persecution. But always there are some who, like the wise men, fall down in joyous faith to worship Him (Matthew 2:11).

The Gifts of the Wise Men

“And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense and myrrh.”
(Matthew 2:11)

These wise men (or Magi) were of great eminence in the Parthian Empire at that time, and it is unlikely that the caravan from the East consisted of only three men. They more likely had a large entourage as they came searching for the future King of Israel, so it was small wonder that “all Jerusalem” was “troubled,” along with king Herod (Matthew 2:3). The Parthians (i.e., Persians) had never been conquered by the Romans and at that very time were posing a significant threat along the eastern boundary of the extended Roman empire.

When they found the young child and His mother in Bethlehem, the Magi “fell down, and worshipped him” (Matthew 2:11). But why did they offer Him just three gifts—and why these three gifts? Somehow they seemed to have sensed, possibly from meditating deeply on the ancient prophecies of Balaam (Numbers 24:17), Daniel (in Daniel 9:24-26), and David, concerning the priesthood order of Melchizedek (Psalm 110:4), that this young child whose birth had been announced by a star was destined not only to be the King but would also become the Messianic Sacrifice to “make reconciliation for iniquity” (see Daniel 9:24-26) and then eventually become our eternal High Priest who “ever liveth to make intercession for them” (Hebrews 7:25). Thus, the gold would acknowledge His right to reign; the frankincense would speak of the incense to be offered in the heavenly tabernacle, and the myrrh (John 19:39) to testify that His crucified body would be so anointed as it entered the tomb for a very temporary burial.

The Christian's Hope

Teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world; Looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ.” (Titus 2:12-13)

The annual remembrance at Christmastime of the first coming of Christ into the world ought naturally to lead to anticipation of His second coming. To the unbeliever, that coming will entail a fiery time of judgment; but to the Christian, the return of Christ is “that blessed hope.”

This promise does not promote Christian indolence, as some have charged. It encourages us, rather, to “live soberly, righteously, and godly.” As John says: “Abide in him; that, when he shall appear, we may have confidence, and not be ashamed before him at his coming” (1 John 2:28). Jesus warned: “Take heed to yourselves, lest at any time your hearts be overcharged with surfeiting, and drunkenness, and cares of this life, and so that day come upon you unawares” (Luke 21:34). How distressing would be the shame of a Christian to be caught in some such situation when his Lord returns!

The hope of His imminent coming is also a great incentive to evangelism and missions. In Paul’s last message immediately after his long description of the last days, he says: “I charge thee therefore before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall judge the quick and the dead at his appearing and his kingdom; Preach the word . . . do the work of an evangelist” (2 Timothy 4:1-2, 5). Jude, also in the context of the imminent return of Christ, urges us: “And of some have compassion, making a difference: And others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire” (Jude 22-23). The blessed hope is, in fact, a quickening incentive in the Christian life. “And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure” (1 John 3:3).

Things Inexpressible in Words

“How that he was caught up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter” (2 Corinthians 12:4)

There are three things called “unspeakable” in the New Testament, with each one translated from a different Greek word. However, they all convey the notion of something which is so marvelous that it simply could not be put into words.

2 Corinthians 12:4 mentions “unspeakable words,” 1 Peter 1:8 refers to “joy unspeakable,” and 2 Corinthians 9:15 speaks of an “unspeakable gift.”

The unspeakable gift to which Paul refers is, of course, the Lord Jesus Christ. This matchless gift is what we Christians seek very inadequately to be thankful for at Christmastime, “the gift of God is eternal life” (Romans 6:23). “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16).

When the apostle Paul received Christ as his Savior, he considered himself as “crucified with Christ,” yet he could also say that “the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20). It was Paul who was chosen on one unique occasion to be “caught up into paradise,” where he “heard unspeakable words.” But whatever he saw and heard convinced him once and for all that once a person decides that “to live is Christ,” then “to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21).

And so it will be for everyone who has received by faith that ultimate, indescribable Christmas gift, the Lord Jesus Christ!

No wonder that other great apostle, Simon Peter, could say that we “rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory” (1 Peter 1:8).

Light in the Darkness

“The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined.” (Isaiah 9:2)

This beautiful verse is treated in the New Testament as a Messianic prophecy, fulfilled when Christ came into the world—growing up in Nazareth and then dwelling in Capernaum—both cities being located in “Galilee of the Gentiles” Matthew 4:15). This was in the region once occupied by the ten northern tribes, and then devastated by the invading Assyrians when they carried the Northern Kingdom away into captivity.

This region had for centuries thereafter remained in spiritual darkness, even after the return of Judah from captivity in Babylon. But then Christ came and “from that time Jesus began to preach, and to say, Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 4:17). Thus, His public ministry actually began in this land of darkness. “And the light shineth in darkness . . . the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world” (John 1:5, 9).

Wherever Christ comes, the light comes, for He is light. He left heaven for earth, saying: “I come to do thy will, O God” (Hebrews 10:9). This great purpose of God is now made manifest by the appearing of our Saviour Jesus Christ, who hath abolished death, and hath brought life and immortality to light through the gospel” (2 Timothy 1:10).

And yet, tragically, “this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved” (John 3:19-20). To those who desire light, Jesus says: “I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life” (John 8:12).

Good Gifts for Our Children

“If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good gifts to them that ask him?” (Matthew 7:11)

It is typical for parents to shower gifts on their children at Christmastime. No doubt this is usually because of love, but there often may be also a sort of guilt-feeling involved—an unconscious attempt to make up for lack of love shown on other days, or maybe even to elicit their obedience and love in response.

Whatever the reason, the Lord does not rebuke the giving of gifts to our children, especially when it is done in such a way as to be a small picture of our heavenly Father giving gifts to His children. His gifts are always good gifts—gifts that are good for us, although they may not always seem so at first.

For example: “Unto you it is given . . . to suffer for [Christ’s] sake” (Philippians 1:29). But, when this is true, “he giveth more grace” (James 4:6). He may give a difficult day, but He also gives strength for the day. He may give an untraveled way, but then gives light for the way.

“Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning” (James 1:17). Because He is the Father of lights—that is, of all energy and power—“He giveth power to the faint; and to them that have no might he increaseth strength” (Isaiah 40:29).

The greatest gift of our “Father which is in heaven,” our “Father of lights,” is of course the “gift of God [which] is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans 6:23). And that is not all He gives! “He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?” (Romans 8:32).

The Bells of Christmas

“In that day shall there be upon the bells of the horses, HOLINESS UNTO THE LORD: and the pots in the Lord’s house shall be like the bowls before the altar.”

Zechariah 14:20)

In these strange times when the traditional Christmas carols are not considered politically correct, the secular songs associated with the gift-giving season are increasingly popular. “Silver Bells,” for example, is a pretty tune which is often sung during this season. Even this song, however, includes the phrase, “Soon it will be Christmas Day,” and so may be banned eventually by the secularists. Also, the bells of the song may cause one to think of the Salvation Army, so this also might be offensive.

But just how did bells become associated with Christmas anyway—or with Christianity itself for that matter? Bells are never mentioned at all in the New Testament. Yet many churches have bells, which are often rung at weddings or funerals, or even just to announce church services. The chorus of a once-familiar hymn even featured the words “when they ring those golden bells for you and me.”

In the Old Testament, two kinds of bells are mentioned. A group of one type of golden bells were on the bottom hem of the robe of the high priest, so that “his sound shall be heard when he goeth in unto the holy place before the LORD, and when he cometh out” (Exodus 28:35).

The other type of bell was that mentioned in the text above. It seems that ancient war horses, especially among the Assyrians, were fitted with bells which would sound out fiercely while charging into battle. In that wonderful age to come, on the other hand, the bells on the horses will ring out glorifying the holiness of God.

Perhaps the bells of Christmas can remind us of both God’s holiness and the sacrifice of our great High Priest, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Why Jesus Came Down from Heaven

“And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven.” (John 3:13)

At the Christmas season, even the secular world makes much of the Christ child, born in a manger, but few ever seem to recognize that He had been eternally one with the Father in heaven before He chose to come down. And even fewer stop to learn just why He chose to come down. As a matter of fact, He had much to say on this subject, giving many reasons why He came. Note just a few of them.

The first reference in the New Testament on this great theme, coming from His own lips, is very significant. “Think not that I “am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill” (Matthew 5:17). His total commitment to God’s written Word was the first thing He came to confirm!

There are so many reasons He has given for His coming that we can just list a small part of them. But note these especially. “For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost” (Luke 19:10). “I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance” (Luke 5:32). “Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword” (Matthew 10:34). “For I came down from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me” (John 6:38). “I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly” (John 10:10).

The last time Christ gives a reason for His coming is also very significant. It refers to His second coming! “Behold, I come quickly; and my reward is with me, to give every man according as his work shall be” (Revelation 22:12).

Garments for the King

“All thy garments smell of myrrh, and aloes, and cassia, out of the ivory palaces, whereby they have made thee glad.” (Psalm 45:8)

One of the most beautiful of the Christmas hymns (though rarely sung at Christmas) is “Out of the Ivory Palaces,” telling how the King of heaven left His heavenly home and laid aside His perfumed, royal clothing to enter “a world of woe.” That this 45th Psalm is symbolic in part is obvious; but that it refers to Christ is also obvious from its use in Hebrews 1:8: “But unto the Son he saith, Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever: a sceptre of righteousness is the sceptre of thy kingdom,” quoting Psalm 45:6.

That the eternal King left heaven to come to earth is not symbolic, however, but very real; nor did He have royal robes in which to be arrayed, for they “wrapped [him] in swaddling clothes” and laid Him “in a manger” (Luke 2:12).

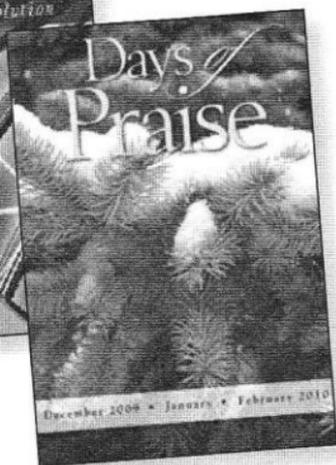
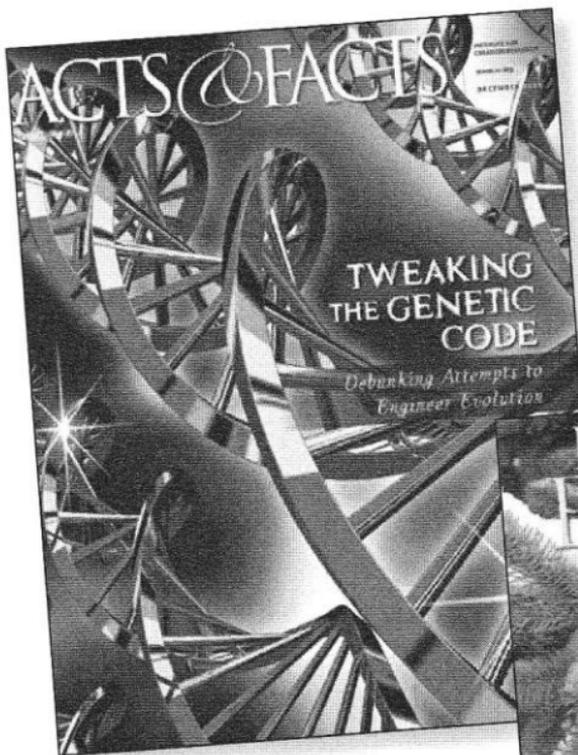
Then, as He later walked the dusty roads of Judea, we know little of what He wore, but we do know that on one notable occasion, He “laid aside his garments; and took a towel, and girded himself. . . . and began to wash the disciples’ feet” (John 13:4-5). A strange garment, and stranger action, for the King of glory!

Yet stranger still that men whom He had created, later “took his garments, and made four parts, to every soldier a part; and also his coat. . . . but cast lots for it” (John 19:23-24), leaving Him naked to die a painful death spiked to a tree. Finally, His little remnant of friends took “the body of Jesus, and wound it in linen clothes” (John 19:40) for His burial.

Now, however, in glory, He once again is arrayed in kingly apparel, “clothed with a garment down to the foot, and . . . with a golden girdle” (Revelation 1:13), and one day, all His redeemed shall see Him—in His beauty—the King in whose law we delight!

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... And the rich He has sent away
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64 He has helped His servant Israel,
In remembrance of His mercy,
65 As He spoke to our fathers,
To Abraham and to his seed
forever."

56 And Mary remained with her about
three months, and returned to her house.

Birth of John the Baptist

57 Now Elizabeth's full time came for
her to be delivered, and she brought
forth a son.

58 When her neighbors and relatives
heard how the Lord had shown great
mercy to her, they rejoiced with her.

Circumcision of John the Baptist

59 Now so it was, on the eighth day,
that they came to circumcise the child;
and they would have called him by the
name of his father, Zacharias.

60 And his mother answered and said,
"No; he shall be called John."

61 But they said to her, "There is no one
among your relatives who is called by
this name."

62 So they made signs to his father—
what he would have him called.

63 And he asked for a writing tablet,
and wrote, saying, "His name is John."

64 Immediately his mouth was opened
and his tongue loosed, and he
praising God.

65 Then

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80 So the child grew and
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Christ Born of Mary

2 And it came to pass in
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