

CHRISTMAS: A SEASON OF MYSTERY

SERIES: JESUS, THE SAVIOR OF THE LOST

by Ron Ritchie

In the early 1940's I lived at 325 Radcliff Street, Bristol, Pennsylvania. My memories of Christmas in that house are special. It was usually snowing when my father dragged the Christmas tree home. One evening was set aside for my sister and I to decorate it with ornaments and lights. Then on Christmas Eve, we'd climb on my father's lap and he would read to us the poem 'The Night Before Christmas.' Later came the time to set out a glass of milk and some cookies for Santa Claus, the mysterious guest who was due to arrive any time. Following this ritual, it was off to bed, with "visions of sugar plums dancing in our heads."

Next morning the Christmas tree was surrounded by gifts and, mystery of mysteries, the milk and cookies were gone. My lasting memories of childhood Christmases then are, snow, Santa Claus, gifts, family, friends and great meals, all of these sprinkled with a dash of religion and frequent playings of Bing Crosby singing 'I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas.'

As I look back on those years I can't help but think how tragic it was to miss out on the greatest mystery of all at Christmas, the celebration of the birth of the Savior Jesus Christ, who invaded the spiritual darkness of our fallen world and became the Savior and Light of man. As John has written, "In Him was life, and the life was the light of men." For Christians, Christmas is a season of mystery, joyful song, and salvation. In all generations the whole world should rejoice and thank God for his indescribable gift, Jesus Christ, who came to redeem us from our sins and give us the gift of eternal life.

This morning then, our subject is "Christmas: A Season of Mystery." We will seek to discover God's mysterious ways and see how he invaded, first, time, then a barren senior citizen, and finally, a young virgin. Our study will be in the Luke's gospel. We begin with the opening seven verses of the first chapter, and we open with

I. The Mystery of Timing 1:1-7

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the Word have handed them down to us, it seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write it out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus; so that you might know the exact truth about the things you have been taught.

In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a certain priest named Zacharias, of the division of Abijah; and he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. And they were both righteous in the sight of God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord. And they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both advanced in years.

A biblical mystery refers to the counsel and activities of God, which are unknown to man except by revelation, concerning His saving work and ultimate purpose in history. The word "mystery" in the biblical sense does not have the idea of a secret to be withheld, but rather, once it is revealed it is to be published abroad. Today we will look at the historical events that led up to the mystery of the incarnation, the fulness of deity in bodily form, God himself in the person of Jesus Christ.

Luke, the author, may have first met the apostle Paul in Antioch, but he did not join Paul's missionary team

until they met again in Troas on Paul's second journey (51 A.D.). The apostle referred to Luke as "the beloved physician" (Col.4:14), but we know this man today as the first Christian church historian. Luke spent the two years of Paul's imprisonment in Caesarea (58-60 A.D.) writing this book. Then he spent the next two years while awaiting Paul's trial in Rome writing the book of Acts to his friend the "most excellent Theophilus," setting out for him the "exact truth about the things you have been taught," in Luke's own words. In order to do so he made use of several different sources. First, he gathered all the accounts about Jesus which had been written during the Lord's time on earth; second, he interviewed many eyewitnesses of Jesus' life and teaching (this group probably included Mary, the mother of Jesus, several of the apostles, and many who had been involved with or directly affected by the life and ministry of the Lord). Luke, in his own words again, "investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write it out for [Theophilus] in consecutive order."

Luke's motive in undertaking this work was so that his friend and the whole Greek world would clearly see that Jesus is the Savior of the world, and that he would be the personal Savior of all who would place their faith in him. So, beginning with the prophetic promise of the forerunner, Luke wrote "about all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day he was taken up" (Acts 1:1-5). Luke sought to carefully present the person and purpose of Jesus. And this was his purpose: "The Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which is lost" (Luke 19:10).

Luke begins his account by showing his friend how the God of the universe had prepared the world stage to receive Jesus, God incarnate. In Galatians 4:4, Paul writes, "...when the fulness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, in order that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons." The divinity, humanity and righteousness of Christ qualified him to be man's Redeemer.

Jesus was born into a world which was ruled by the government of Rome. The Roman Empire stretched from the Atlantic to the Caspian, from Britain to the Nile, from Hadrian's Wall to the Euphrates. All frontiers disappeared as these many nations came under the authority of the Roman Empire. Pax Romana, the peace of Rome, prevailed in the empire. One language was common to all, and Rome built roads throughout the empire leading to the capital.

Economically, this was a time of high civil and religious taxes. Rome was responsible to feed 60 million slaves, and there was famine in many parts of the empire. Morally, the world was held captive by idolatry, superstition and fear. One of their own poets wrote, "The world was growing old and not even Caesar could make it young again." In the words of the apostle Paul, "...they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of a corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures" (Rom.1:21-23). Writing about this time, J.S. Stewart says,

"What was a whole pantheon of gods worth if they had nothing to say to a man with a broken heart? What could the divinity of Caesar say to a soul stabbed with the remorse of sin? When everything had been done that could be done, the hungry hearts of men and women were hungry still."

In the Jewish world, the Romans had set a king, Herod of Judea, an Edomite from the loins of Esau, over the people of Judea. Someone wrote of Herod that he was "Jewish in religion, heathen in practice, and monster in character." Caesar Augustus said of him, "It is better to be Herod's hog than his son."

For 400 years, the Jews had not heard a word from any prophet. Their leaders were fighting over how to define the characteristics of the kingdom of God. The Pharisees and the Sadducees were considered to be too liberal by the fundamentalist Essenes; the Zealots were seeking to establish by force the kingdom of God.

In the midst of this spiritual darkness and tension, however, there remained a remnant who longed for the Messiah to come. Two members of this remnant were the godly Jewish couple, Zacharias the priest, and Elizabeth his wife. These senior citizens were, according to Luke, "righteous in the sight of God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord." But Elizabeth was barren, a reproach and

a humiliation to her and her family. God's timing, however, is always perfect, and it was perfect with this older couple.

I read recently that Billy Graham was 70 years old on November 7th. This man has preached the gospel to more than 100 million people in 80 countries. "How could this have happened?" asked the magazine article. "How could a shy country boy from the foothills of North Carolina sway millions and stand before kings?" Some have said that the media created Billy Graham, that William Randolph Hearst told his newspapers to "Puff Graham." But Billy's answer to this puzzle is "the hand of God." The Spirit of God fell on this unpromising material and called him to be an evangelist. Yes, God's timing is always perfect.

Christmas is indeed a season of mystery. At a time when the Roman, Greek and Jewish worlds were locked in spiritual darkness, yet, "when the fulness of time had come," God invaded world history once again, sending one of his angels to announce the birth of the forerunner of Jesus Christ.

And the mother of this forerunner was to be Elizabeth, the barren senior citizen, the wife of the priest Zacharias. An announcement of this event is what we will next encounter in Luke's narrative.

II. The Mystery of Barrenness 1:8-25

Now it came about, while he was performing his priestly service before God in the appointed order of his division, according to the custom of the priestly office, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And the whole multitude of the people were in prayer outside at the hour of the incense offering. And an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the altar of incense. And Zacharias was troubled when he saw him, and fear gripped him. But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your petition has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will give him the name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth. For he will be great in the sight of the Lord, and he will drink no wine or liquor; and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, while yet in his mother's womb. And he will turn back many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God. And it is he who will go as a forerunner before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers back to the children, and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous; so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

And Zacharias said to the angel, "How shall I know this for certain? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years." And the angel answered him and said to him, "I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God; and I have been sent to speak to you, and to bring you this good news. And behold, you shall be silent and unable to speak until the day when these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which shall be fulfilled in their proper time." And the people were waiting for Zacharias, and were wondering at his delay in the temple. But when he came out, he was unable to speak to them; and they realized that he had seen a vision in the temple; and he kept making signs to them, and remained mute. And it came about, when the days of his priestly service were ended, that he went back home. And after these days Elizabeth his wife became pregnant; and she kept herself in seclusion for five months, saying, "This is the way the Lord has dealt with me in the days when He looked with favor upon me, to take away my disgrace among men."

Elizabeth was barren. The root of the word is "dry, parched, no life, no fruit." Barrenness was a reproach, for every godly Jewish woman hoped to be the mother of the promised Messiah, notably Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Hannah, all of whom once were sterile. Elizabeth was no different as a young woman. She, too, hoped to be the mother of the Messiah, but now she had reached old age. She had given up hoping. From God's point of view, however, her barrenness symbolized the barrenness of the Roman, Greek and Jewish worlds who were in need of a Savior to rescue them from the empty promises of the world, the flesh and the devil.

The Lord had appointed the sons of Aaron to be the priests of Israel and to serve him and his people in the temple. The various groups of priests were each assigned a season to serve in this way, and their duties were

determined by lot. When Zacharias, Elizabeth's husband, came to Jerusalem to serve in his capacity as a priest, he drew a lot in which he was required to enter the Holy Place. There the table of shewbread and the altar of incense lay. He then was to come out from the Holy Place and bless the people gathered for worship and pray to the Lord.

But Zacharias was delayed because an angel of the Lord appeared before him. This was Gabriel, the same angel who appeared twice to the prophet Daniel. Zacharias was troubled and fearful, but the angel calmed his fears and told him that his petition had been heard: his wife would bear a son and he would be given the name John. Like the husband of Hannah, Zacharias had earlier petitioned the Lord to open his wife's womb. He had been encouraged to do so because of God's mercy shown towards women like Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel. Here once again we have evidence that we serve a God who not only hears our prayers, but who in his mercy, according to his will and timing, is willing to answer our prayers.

The name of the son who would be born, according to the angel, would be John. The name means "gift of God," "Jehovah is gracious." As a result of God's grace, Zacharias and Elizabeth would personally have joy and gladness, and many would rejoice at this child's birth. Then, referring to John's character, the angel told Zacharias that the boy would be "great in the sight of the Lord." Later, Jesus would say of John, "Truly I say to you, among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist..." (Matt.11:11). "He will drink no wine or liquor," said the angel. He would be a Nazirite, like Samson, men given to Israel as a symbol of consecration unto the Lord for a period, or even a lifetime. "And he will be filled with the Holy Spirit while in his mother's womb." The Holy Spirit was given to him in order to empower him to fulfill all that the Lord would require of him during his lifetime.

Next, the angel described John's ministry: "He will turn back many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God." John would be the fulfillment of the the word of the prophets Isaiah and Malachi: "Behold I am going to send my messenger, and he will clear the way before Me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, the Lord of hosts." The angel continued, "in the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before the Messiah 'to turn the hearts of the fathers back to the children,' and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous; so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." As Elijah, the stern prophet of repentance, some 800 years earlier had rebuked King Ahab, the idolatrous king of Israel, and called a remnant from apostasy to God, so John would turn many from unbelief to repentance. So after 400 years of silence, God was about to speak again through this man John, whose birth was announced to Zacharias by the angel.

Zacharias' response was one of unbelief: "How shall I know this for certain? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years." The angel answered by presenting his credentials, saying, "I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God..." Then he told Zacharias that because he failed to believe what he had told him, he would be unable to speak until after his son was born. Zacharias had just heard the greatest news that had been imparted to Israel in 400 years but he would be unable to speak about it because of his unbelief. Elizabeth, however, responded to the news with joy, giving God the credit for removing her "disgrace among men."

The spiritual principle here is that God had made a promise to Abraham and the fathers that one day in time, a perfect and "proper time" (verse 20), he would send his Messiah to the nation of Israel to set up his kingdom and carry out his plan of redemption. No human being, power or government, no event or moment of unbelief would stop this plan. The world was in darkness and needed a Savior, and the time had now come for God's plan to be unveiled. The angel Gabriel was his messenger of the good news of the forerunner who would precede the Messiah. And God did not seek out a couple of yuppies to go forth with his plan. He chose instead two godly senior citizens to begin working his salvation process. This is how God works throughout history, taking that which is barren and imparting life, whether it be in a failing marriage, a struggle with drugs or alcohol, a bitter spirit, whatever. This is what he was doing in this story with Zacharias and Elizabeth. He was imparting life once more to Israel after 400 years of prophetic silence.

So we have already looked at the mystery of God's timing, and the mystery of barrenness, as he answered the prayers of a barren older couple. Now God moves to complete his plan by seeking the cooperation of a young Jewish virgin.

III. The Mystery of the Virgin Birth 1:26-38

Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city in Galilee, called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the descendants of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. And coming in, he said to her, "Hail, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was greatly troubled at this statement, and kept pondering what kind of salutation this might be. And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb, and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever; and His kingdom will have no end." And Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" And the angel answered and said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy offspring shall be called the Son of God. And behold, even your relative Elizabeth has also conceived a son in her old age; and she who was called barren is now in her sixth month. For nothing will be impossible with God." And Mary said, "Behold, the bondservant of the Lord; be it done unto me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.

Mary was a young Jewish virgin who lived in the Roman garrison town of Nazareth, a few miles west of the Sea of Galilee, a land peopled by farmers of low moral character who spoke a rude dialect. She was engaged to a righteous young carpenter named Joseph, of the lineage of David. Betrothals in those days lasted one year and were just as binding as marriage; they could be broken only by divorce. Gabriel said to Mary, "Hail, favored one! The Lord is with you...you will conceive in your womb, and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus." Mary had not consummated her relationship with Joseph, yet here was this stranger telling her that she would have a son who would be named Jesus ("Jehovah saves"). Thus, Gabriel gave word of the impending birth of the Savior.

Then he spoke of the ministry of Jesus: "He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David..." Some 700 years earlier, Isaiah wrote of this child who would be born to Mary and Joseph, "A child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; and the government will rest on His shoulders; and His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace."

Mary responded to the angel by asking, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" What a beautiful spirit she manifests as she begins to realize the consequences of what she has just heard the angel say to her. Then Gabriel reveals the mystery in these words, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy offspring shall be called the Son of God." In these words, Gabriel revealed the mystery of the incarnation. Paul writes in Colossians 2:2-9, "God's mystery, that is Christ himself, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge...for in Him all the fulness of deity dwells in bodily form." This is the mystery of the incarnation. Mary's gracious response came in these words, "Behold, the bondservant of the Lord; be it done to me according to your word."

This story provides no evidence of any kind for the doctrine of an immaculate conception or a miraculous birth, as the Catholic church teaches. Pope Pius 9 in Rome presented this statement to his church on December 8, 1854: "...the blessed Virgin Mary to have been from the first instant of her conception by a singular grace and privilege of Almighty God, in view of the merits of Jesus Christ the Saviour of mankind, preserved free from all stain of original sin, was revealed by God and therefore, to be firmly and constantly believed by all the faithful." This view is scripturally baseless, historically unjustified, and doctrinally unsound.

According to the New Testament, this incident refers to a virgin birth. Mary was a virgin who gave birth to a son, having never known a husband sexually. This is the mystery of the incarnation. As John's gospel puts it, "In the beginning was the Word, and the word was with God, and the Word was God...and the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of

grace and truth." James Boice says, "The incarnation is the invasion by the God of history through One who is uniquely both God and Man."

Here is what G. Campbell-Morgan wrote about the mystery of the incarnation:

In the coming of the eternal Word to the earth for the purposes of redemption, He did not lay aside the essential fact of His deity. He simply changed the form of manifestation. It would seem clearly evident that the Son of God had forever been the One in whom God took form, and therefore the One through whom God was revealed. The Son is always the manifestation of the Father...What the form, what the manifestation was in the past, it is impossible to declare, for it is beyond the comprehension of the finite and the limited. This alone is certain, that He was the Word, the Speech, the Method of communication of the Eternal God. For the redemption of Man he laid aside that form, whatever it may have been, and took a new form for manifesting the same God, a form upon which men might look, and through which, in the process of time, they might come to know the eternal God. He was God/man, not God indwelling man, one personality, two natures.

How could the pre-existent Son of God (deity) become man? Mary asked, "How can this be since I am a virgin?" Gabriel answer to this was, "nothing will be impossible with God." Adam was created by God without a human father or mother; Eve was taken out of man without benefit of a mother; Jesus had a human mother but no human father. Nothing is impossible with God.

Why was a virgin birth necessary? Some scholars have suggested that, based on the words of Romans 5, "Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned...", that the seed of death is passed on to each new child in every generation by the sperm of man and not the egg of woman. Therefore Jesus was born of woman because of the perfect seed of the Holy Spirit, and our sinless Savior went to the cross as the perfect and innocent Lamb of God. He suffered the wrath of God on our behalf, was buried, and rose again to become the perfect Mediator between man and God. Hebrews says, "...we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses but one who has been tempted in all things as we are yet without sin..." The person of the incarnate Christ included undiminished deity and perfect humanity, united in one Person forever.

Christmas is a season of mystery. A biblical mystery is a truth of God that can only come to man by spiritual revelation. Once revealed, it is to be proclaimed. In this season we can proclaim the mystery of timing (God's control over time and space); the mystery of barrenness (God can bring life out of death); and the mystery of the virgin birth (the impossible becoming possible). Christmas is a time not to reflect only on presents, family gatherings and feasting, but on the mystery of the incarnation. It is not a time to try and figure out who ate the cookies and drank the milk that are set out on Christmas Eve. Christmas celebrates the fact that God became flesh and came to earth in the person of Jesus to offer salvation through his death on the cross to all who place their faith in Jesus. If we will by faith come to him, he will give us the gift of eternal life, the indescribable gift of himself. What a mystery, now revealed. Let us proclaim this good news this Christmas season and throughout our lives to all who will listen.

Catalog No. 4116
Luke 1:1-38
First Message
Ron R. Ritchie
December 11, 1988

Copyright (C) 1995 Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. This data file is the sole property of Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. It may be copied only in its entirety for circulation freely without charge. All copies of this data file must contain the above copyright notice. This data file may not be copied in part, edited, revised, copied for resale or incorporated in any commercial

publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays or other products offered for sale, without the written permission of Discovery Publishing. Requests for permission should be made in writing and addressed to Discovery Publishing, 3505 Middlefield Rd. Palo Alto, CA. 94306-3695.