

THE LONG-AWAITED SON

SERIES: THE BIRTH OF CHRIST

By Steve Zeisler

I wonder what it would be like if we could transport one of the participants in the first Christmas forward in time to our day—a shepherd or Zacharias or Simeon, perhaps. Surely they would find it unbelievable that response to the Savior’s birth has become a matter of routine observance and tradition! The nativity of Jesus is in a category by itself, unique. Our problem is that the accounts of this event have become too familiar.

Many of us have difficulty embracing the Christmas season without getting caught up in all of the distracting elements. Some folks find this the most difficult time of year. Let me say a word about Christmas traditions before we look at our text. Christmas is one of the most important seasons in the life of our culture. It brings two different kinds of opportunities. One is for ministry to those who are sorrowful at this time of year, those who feel lonely and on the outside, who are discouraged and depressed. Another opportunity is to build on acts of kindness and expressions of beauty, on the good attempts to celebrate Christmas, in order to help non-Christians understand its greater meaning.

When we go back into the text of the New Testament, however, we’ll realize that the event that brought about the modern Christmas holiday was very different from anything that goes on during the month of December in this culture. We’re going to study Matthew 1.

Only two of the four gospels tell of the birth of Jesus: Matthew and Luke. Of those two, Luke is the most familiar and most detailed. Most of the Bible stories that leap to mind when you think of Christmas are in Luke: the angels and the shepherds, the journey to Bethlehem, the baby in the manger. Luke’s telling of Christmas is very personal. He begins with an elderly couple who have not had a child, Zacharias and Elizabeth, who are visited by an angel and are finally able to conceive. The story unfolds as the angel Gabriel comes to a young girl, Mary. Shepherds, hearing an angel choir, their faces shining with wonder at the glory of the extraordinary announcement and the angels’ song, run as fast as they can to the place of the Child’s birth. We meet Simeon and Anna, two elderly saints who have waited for the coming of the promised Savior. All of these people are filled with the wonder of who this Child is. God has reduced himself, unthinkably, to the size of a new-born infant.

Luke’s account of the life of Christ frequently takes the perspective of women. In his birth narrative, pregnancy is taken more seriously than it is in Matthew, in the experiences of both Elizabeth and Mary. Luke tells of Mary’s journey from Galilee to Bethlehem, “with child.” Mary was very likely Luke’s source for this information, and he records events as seen through her eyes.

But my intention in these Christmas messages is not to go to the more familiar stories in Luke, but to turn to Matthew instead. Matthew’s birth narrative is shorter and not quite as personal. Matthew writes from the perspective of Jesus’ royalty. Matthew tells us that Jesus’ birth was the fulfillment of ancient prophecies. It was the answer to human longings that had existed for a very long time. This child was the King who had been promised.

Luke includes Jesus’ genealogy after the story of his birth, at the end of chapter 3. Matthew’s story of Jesus begins with a genealogy. Again, this is a royal genealogy. This is the son of Abraham, the son of

David, the promised One whom we're meeting here.

The hope of his people

Matthew 1:1-17:

The record of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham: Abraham was the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers. Judah was the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, Perez was the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Ram. Ram was the father of Amminadab, Amminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon. Salmon was the father of Boaz by Rahab, Boaz was the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse. Jesse was the father of David the king.

David was the father of Solomon by Bathsheba who had been the wife of Uriah. Solomon was the father of Rehoboam, Rehoboam the father of Abijah, and Abijah the father of Asa. Asa was the father of Jehoshaphat, Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, and Joram the father of Uzziah. Uzziah was the father of Jotham, Jotham the father of Ahaz, and Ahaz the father of Hezekiah. Hezekiah was the father of Manasseh, Manasseh the father of Amon, and Amon the father of Josiah. Josiah became the father of Jeconiah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon.

After the deportation to Babylon: Jeconiah became the father of Shealtiel, and Shealtiel the father of Zerubbabel. Zerubbabel was the father of Abihud, Abihud the father of Eliakim, and Eliakim the father of Azor. Azor was the father of Zadok, Zadok the father of Achim, and Achim the father of Eliud. Eliud was the father of Eleazar, Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob. Jacob was the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, by whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.

So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations.

This genealogy is that of the family line of Joseph. Jesus was Joseph's legal heir, and therefore he inherited the right to the throne of David through Joseph. Most scholars believe that the genealogy in Luke is that of Mary's family line. She also was a descendant of David, and Jesus inherited the right to David's throne through her as well.

The references to "fourteen generations" here is a style choice that Matthew made. There were actually more generations than he records. He wanted to have lists of fourteen, perhaps making it easier to memorize, and possibly also because of some numerological concerns that were important to Jews. Three groups of fourteen equal six groups of seven, and that would have had significance for them. However, that will not be my emphasis in considering these genealogies.

Verses 18-25:

Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: when His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit. And Joseph her husband, being a righteous man and not wanting to

disgrace her, planned to send her away secretly. But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.” Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: “Behold, the virgin shall be with child and shall bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,” which translated means, “God with us.” And Joseph awoke from his sleep and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took Mary as his wife, but kept her a virgin until she gave birth to a Son; and he called His name Jesus.

Matthew indicates two names for the child—one spoken by a prophet, the other by an angel. In Isaiah’s prophecy, his name is Immanuel; in the words of the angel to Joseph, he will be called Jesus. Those names both carry great significance, as we will see.

The genealogy we just read consists of name after name after name, with the same phrasing repeated throughout. How can this benefit us? There are a couple of points to see. The first is that God has staked himself on a particular line of promises. Abraham’s family is the family of promise (Genesis 12:1-3). Then Abraham’s family through his son Isaac is the family of promise (Genesis 17:15-21; 22:16-18; 26:1-5), then through Isaac’s son Jacob and his twelve sons (Genesis 28:1-4, 10-15). Then of the twelve sons, it is Judah from whom Messiah would be born (Genesis 49:8-10; Micah 5:2-5). Eventually there is David the king from Judah’s line, and it is one of his descendants who is coming as the promised Ruler who will set things right (2 Samuel 7:8-16). There is no other line from which Messiah can come than this line. The promises of God are certain. He has made them from the beginning, from the call of Abraham, indeed from the time of Adam and Eve, when he foretold that Eve would have a child who would defeat the evil one (Genesis 3:14-15). The world has been waiting for the Savior to come all this time, but he will come only through these forebears.

There’s a contemporary businessman from Korea who claims messianic standing. There are many reasons his claims fall flat, but among them is that he is not from the right family. There was a psychotic preacher in Waco who made messianic claims not too long ago, which resulted in the deaths of hundreds of innocent people. There were many reasons to reject his claims, but one of them was that he was not from the line of promise. Jesus is. Jesus came at the right time from the right place, answering the hopes that had been raised by God as he spoke through Scripture.

Genealogies are a record of faith. The godly people of every generation were asking, “Lord, will the awaited Son be born in my lifetime?” There were fourteen generations and fourteen more generations and fourteen more. Each time, the hopes were dashed. He did not come. Yet they couldn’t stop hoping. They longed for God to do something, but came to their end without seeing their hopes realized. We can draw inspiration from centuries of faith, and recognize that we are privileged to live in the days when Messiah’s name is known to us.

God with us, our Savior

The names given to this Boy are very important. God’s companionship is at the center of his identity. Immanuel, “God with us,” means God knows us, God walks with us, God never forsakes us. It means we have the companionship of God when we are in the most desperate circumstances. The promise of the Savior’s having this name is that he will never go away. There is no place we can go that he will not go with us. Even in our sin, he goes with us. In our extremities and in our fears, he goes with us.

Joseph was told to name the Boy Jesus. Jesus means “The Savior.” He would break the power of the guilt of our past sins. He would destroy the fountain of sin within us that makes us want to speak and act in ways that are hurtful to others and demeaning to us. And someday he would wipe the universe clean of every vestige of sin. He’s the Savior! He’s the King, the powerful leader of the armies of heaven. He’s going to destroy everything that ruins those he loves.

Again, Matthew’s telling of Messiah’s arrival is not as tender and personal as Luke’s. We don’t see as many faces close-up. Luke told of Simeon and Anna, of Mary, of shepherd boys. There is not very much of that in Matthew. But there is one exception in chapter 1. One individual is prominent: Joseph. (There are later references to the Magi, who were not there in the first weeks after Jesus’ birth, and Herod.)

The father of the divine Son

There’s a story I read somewhere about how every year the manger scene comes out, and you have to arrange the various figures in it. Of course Baby Jesus is in the middle, and Mary is next to him with a halo, and there are cuddly animals over there. The shepherds have drawn near with beaming faces, having just seen a choir of angels whose song is still ringing in their ears. But where is Joseph? He’s at the back, behind a bale of hay. You never know where to put him. And there’s something to that, because he is a figure who recedes from view easily. But it’s Joseph we meet in Matthew 1. Let’s consider the choice God made in putting Joseph in the story where he is.

In contrast to Mary, Joseph is a very quiet individual as we meet him in the New Testament. Mary talks a lot. In most settings where she appears, she has something to say. You always know what she was thinking. When she heard Elizabeth’s prophetic greeting, she broke out in praise of God (Luke 1:46-55). At one point in Jesus’ public ministry Mary thought he had become deranged (Mark 3:21, 31). She was the quintessential Jewish mother, it seems to me. I think she was a powerful personality and an expressive person. But there’s no recorded statement by Joseph anywhere in the New Testament.

Mary, of course, was predicted by Isaiah. “The virgin shall be with child and shall bear a Son...” For centuries, she had been anticipated in this prophetic statement. She recognized of herself, “From this time on all generations will count me blessed” (Luke 1:48.) As I mentioned earlier, she was probably the one from whom Luke got much of the information for his gospel. She was a member of the early church (Acts 1:14).

Joseph almost certainly died before Jesus’ ministry. We know that he was alive when Jesus was twelve. There’s a scene that takes place when Jesus goes into the temple in Jerusalem and confounds the teachers; and his parents, not knowing what has become of him, search for him for days before they find him. Even then, his mother is the one who quizzes him. “What in the world do you think you’re doing?” (Luke 2:48.) Joseph doesn’t say anything.

There is no reference to Joseph during Jesus’ ministry, so the best guess is that he probably died sometime between Jesus’ teens and late twenties. But Joseph had a crucial role to play. Jesus had to learn to be a man from somebody when he was growing up. He would have learned to pray from his father. He would have learned to care about important things and handle difficult things, and would have been given a skill to earn a living from his father. This man in the back of the manger scene is the man the Lord chose to be the human father of the Son who would save the world. I think he deserves to at least be out in front of the bale of hay!

There are three things we can tell about Joseph from this text. The first is his tenderness of heart. Matthew says that “Mary [who] had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together... was found to

be with child.” I’m sure he was not able to talk with Mary about her condition. He learned of her pregnancy without being informed of its meaning. It may have been during the time when she was visiting her cousin Elizabeth in Judea during Elizabeth’s pregnancy, when she was newly pregnant herself. Joseph cannot have concluded anything else except that his wife preferred someone else to him, that she had rejected him and had a lover. This was the woman he loved and had intended to marry. Yet he looked for a way to end their betrothal and allow her to move on with her life without humiliating her. His instincts were tenderhearted. He wanted to be a blessing to someone else even when he was hurt and angry.

The second thing we observe about Joseph is that he was “a righteous man.” He cared about what God cared about. The way of God was foremost for him. He must have been a man who worshiped often and prayed deeply, who acted on truth when he learned it. That’s what it means to be righteous.

Finally, he was an obedient man. Verse 24: “Joseph awoke from his sleep and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him....” There are three times in Matthew 1 and 2 when Joseph gets a word from an angel to do something, and the very next line all three times is, “He got up and did what the Lord commanded.”

I think all of these things must have figured into God’s choice for him to be the human father of the divine Son: tenderheartedness, a love of righteousness, and a willingness to obey.

The accounts of Jesus’ birth present a story without parallel, an event of unique beauty and significance. I hope we find a way in the midst of the familiar themes of Christmas to reclaim the opportunity: “Come, let us adore Him!” (1).

As a last thought, I would commend Joseph to you. He was God’s choice of father for his own Son, and his example can be life-changing and challenging for us.

NOTES:

(1) Ascribed to John Francis Wade, translated from Latin by Frederick Oakeley, *O Come, All Ye Faithful*.

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Matthew 1:1-25
First Message
Steve Zeisler
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