

The Birth Of Jesus Christ (Part One): Annunciation

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***Forerunner*, "Prophecy Watch," December 2005**

The world, with its catchy ditties, pretty lights, red-nosed reindeer, and candy canes, has taken all the meaning out of Christmas!

That probably sounds strange coming from someone in the church of God. Indeed, God's people should not keep Christmas, as it is nowhere biblically commanded, and its fundamental dishonesty and pagan nature make it unchristian. However, the world's celebration of Christmas has wrung all meaning out of the biblical passages that deal with Christ's birth. Now they are known as little more than lyrics for Christmas songs.

In "The Messiah," George Frideric Handel tried—and in many ways succeeded—to express in music the glory of those biblical passages, but in most cases, they are trivialized, commercialized, or some way denigrated so that their real meaning is obscured or even eliminated. What has come down to us as traditional understanding is a pale imitation of what the Gospel writers, particularly Matthew and Luke, tried to get across to their readers.

The accounts of Christ's birth are now so commonplace and stereotyped that we rarely give them even a thought. Church of God members tend to avoid them because they contain connotations of the world's way of looking at Christ's birth. Many of us rarely even read those passages in the Bible anymore, but we should because they are quite significant. They must be, since God included them in His Word in two different gospels.

Paul writes in II Timothy 3:16-17, "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work." Perhaps we think of these passages about Jesus' birth as less than others due to the way the world has hijacked them. However, by seeing them in a correct light, we can come to a greater appreciation for them beyond the traditional Christmas portrayal.

Luke's Account

Luke is an extraordinary historian. He not only gives us the facts of what happened, but he also tells an entertaining story while doing so. He is a master of concise writing, and though at times an economy of words omits details that might be interesting to know, Luke includes precisely what is needed. He is also gifted in helping a reader make the right connections between what had happened and what would happen.

"The beloved physician" is probably the most literary of the Gospel writers, having produced a masterpiece of literature. He tends to be a little more artistic in his approach to Christ's life. He employs foreshadowing, makes historical references, uses dramatic effects, all while moving the story along with an economy of words.

As a biographer, Luke wants his audience to know what happened in Jesus' life, but as a member of God's church, and most likely a minister, he also wants to teach us what Christ taught, as well as what He means to a Christian. All this is packed into the gospel of Luke.

We begin in Luke 1. Many people know the wording of these passages by heart, because they are lyrics of Christmas songs, or they are recited in Christmas plays at schools and in Protestant churches. We have heard them regularly for years and years.

Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And having come in, the angel said to her, "Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women!" But when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and considered what manner of greeting this was. Then the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God." (Luke 1:26-30)

Any modern newspaper editor would look at his opening salvo and say, "What a wonderful opening paragraph for this story!" Luke gives the who, what, where, and when right away, and gets to the why in short order. A complex scene is set out in order in just a few words.

Former Catholics will recognize verse 28 from the recitation of the rosary, "Hail, Mary, full of grace," taken from Jerome's Latin Vulgate, but the Greek does not read anything like that. Nor is there any authority to pray this to her. What the angel, probably Gabriel, really says to her is, "Rejoice, Mary, because you have found favor with God." She is so highly favored that the Lord blesses her, among all women on earth at the time, to be chosen for the honor of bearing and raising His Son.

Luke is actually suggesting, not that Mary should be adored for her favor with God, but that *God* should receive glory and adoration for bestowing such a blessing on her. *He* is the source of her favor; He gives it by grace to her, not because she was somehow qualified for it. She must have been a pretty good person, but she was not converted at the time. She was an ordinary Jewess of the line of David, though specially prepared for this blessing. Nevertheless, God displays His graciousness, not Mary's.

Most commentaries guess that she was about fourteen years old at the time, as that was the age when women commonly married then. Perhaps she was a little older. Tradition says that Joseph himself was an older man and might have desired a slightly older wife than was normal.

Verse 29 states that she was perplexed, agitated, or disturbed by what the angel said to her. She probably had no idea what to think, but to her credit, she did not become flighty or melt into a quivering mass. The Scriptures bring out that Mary was a serious thinker. In Luke 2:51, the evangelist tells us that she "kept all these things [concerning Jesus] in her heart," suggesting that she was patient, thoughtful, and wise. She did not jump to conclusions but let matters play out.

Quoting Scripture

The angel continues:

"And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a son, and shall call His name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end." Then Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I do not know a man?" and the angel answered and said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God. Now indeed, Elizabeth your relative has also conceived a son in her old age; and this is now the sixth month for her who was called barren. For with God nothing will be impossible." Then Mary said, "Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her. (Luke 1:31-38)

The angel is actually quoting or paraphrasing Scripture to her, particularly two Messianic prophecies from Isaiah that many religious Jews probably had on the tips of their tongues. They were expecting Messiah to come soon, and knew these prophecies had to come to pass for Messiah to be born.

The first is from Isaiah 7:14: "Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call His name Immanuel." *Immanuel* means "God with us." Gabriel inserts a different name, one that God's Son would normally be called: Jesus, which means "Savior." It is really not so different since only God Himself can save.

The second part of Gabriel's paraphrase comes from Isaiah 9:6-7:

For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of His government and peace there will be no end. Upon the throne of David and over His kingdom, to order it and establish it with judgment and justice from that time forward, even forever. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this.

How did the angel convince Mary of what was happening? He quoted Old Testament prophecies to her! In effect, he tells her, "Look, Mary. God has chosen you to fulfill these prophecies."

In response, she asks a very practical question: "How can this be? I can't have a baby. Joseph and I have not consummated the marriage." He replies to her in a parallelism, a form of speech that Hebrew and Aramaic speakers often used to add detail to their statements: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you," and then he defines what he means: "And the power of the Highest will overshadow you." Putting these two clauses together, he defines the Holy Spirit as the power of the Highest; it is God's ability to effect this miracle.

The angel's use of "overshadow" was undoubtedly comforting to her. To us, it might sound intimidating to be overshadowed by the power of the Highest, but Mary, well-versed in Scripture, gives no reaction that it frightened her. Perhaps she thought of Exodus 40:34-38, in which similar language is used of God covering the Tabernacle in the wilderness with the pillar of cloud and fire. To an Israelite, it was comforting to think that God would hover above them like an eagle over its nest, with wings outspread, protecting, providing, and helping.

It may have also made her think of the constant miracles that God did on behalf of His people in the wilderness. God provided for them constantly for forty years, and the Bible is clear that nothing

happened unless God allowed it. Through Gabriel, God was telling Mary, "I'm going to take care of all of this. There is no need to worry." And apparently, her anxieties disappeared.

God then gives her a sign to confirm what He has just said. He tells her to visit her cousin, Elizabeth—an old, barren woman, whom she would find to be six months pregnant! This was also a sign to show Mary that everything would be fine. When she went to see her cousin (Luke 1:39-42), the as-yet-unborn John the Baptist leaped in Elizabeth's womb, confirming to both Elizabeth and Mary that everything that they had heard was true. Moreover, Elizabeth repeats what the angel said to Mary: "Blessed are you among women. Blessed is the fruit of your womb" (verse 42).

Verse 37, "For with God nothing will be impossible," is another comforting reference to the Old Testament. A more literal translation of his statement would be, "For no saying from God shall be void of power," or "For no word from God shall be powerless." This makes it a paraphrase of Isaiah 55:11: "So shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to Me void, but it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it."

In effect, he assures her, "This is certain because God has said so." Her response reflects that she is completely convinced by this: "Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38). This is reminiscent of Hannah's attitude in I Samuel 2. Like her, Mary submits unconditionally to God's election of her for this task. She says, "I am the Lord's servant. He can do with me what He will." She gives her life to it.

Joseph's Dream

Matthew 1 contains a second annunciation to a person who would also be very much involved in this whole process, Joseph. It is apparent that God waited several months before telling him, as it had become apparent that Mary was pregnant

Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: After His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Spirit. Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not wanting to make her a public example, was minded to put her away secretly. But while he thought about these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins." Now all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying: "Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel," which is translated, "God with us." Then Joseph, being aroused from sleep, did as the angel of the Lord commanded him and took to him his wife, and did not know her till she had brought forth her firstborn Son. And he called His name Jesus. (Matthew 1:18-25)

Joseph seems to have been a naturally kind and caring man, well-suited to Mary. Like her, he did not fly off the handle when he found things out. He was thoughtful, considering the best way to handle the situation. In his day, a woman could receive lifelong shame for becoming pregnant out of wedlock. He desired to "put her away" as quietly as possible without bringing any further shame upon Mary or himself, for that matter. While he was still mulling it over, an angel, probably Gabriel again, appeared to him in a dream.

Throughout this episode, Joseph is shown to be a humble, pious, obedient man. He takes what the angel says without complaint or even reply. Once he is aroused from sleep, Joseph does just as the angel commands him. The angel's word was enough. The man was convinced. He would comply.

Gabriel tells Joseph almost the same things he said to Mary. It is somewhat odd, though, since it was through Joseph that Jesus would physically claim David's throne, that the angel does not mention that Jesus would be King. This is also interesting because, throughout his Gospel, Matthew constantly mentions Jesus' royal nature. Instead, Gabriel tells Joseph that Mary's Son, whom everyone would think is his Son, would be named Jesus, "for He will save His people from their sins." He also reiterates that He will be God with us and that He was conceived of the Holy Spirit.

These points hint that Joseph was more interested in spiritual matters than physical ones. Perhaps he had not allowed his Davidic lineage to go to his head. He did not need the spur of his adoptive Son becoming King to make him comply. All he needed to know was that God through the Holy Spirit had accomplished Mary's pregnancy, and that the divine Child, in fulfillment of prophecy, would one day save His people from sin.

In His sovereignty, God prepared the perfect couple to raise His Son. They are wonderful examples of submission to God. Even though His intervention in their lives threw a huge monkey wrench into their personal plans, they selflessly said, "So be it, Lord. What would You like us to do next?"