



Christmas

THE REAL Miracle Story

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Every Christmas season Christians give thanks to our heavenly Father for his love and grace, showered upon us through the birth of Jesus.

The traditional carols we sing memorialize the meaning of Jesus' birth—Joy to the World, O Holy Night, The First Noel, Silent Night, Hark the Herald Angels Sing, O Little Town of Bethlehem, Away in a Manger, God Rest Ye Merry Gentleman—and many others.

“Silent Night” is one of my favorite carols because it speaks so directly to the inspiring scriptural story. Here are some of the words:

“Silent night, holy night, all is calm,
all is bright round yon virgin mother and child...
Shepherds quake at the sight...
heavenly hosts sing Alleluia! Christ the Savior is
born...

Son of God, love's pure light...
with the dawn of redeeming grace,
Jesus, Lord, at thy birth...

With the angels let us sing, Alleluia to our King.”

How beautiful are the thoughts of this carol, as it points us to the joy of our salvation through his life, death, resurrection and future coming in visible glory.

Yet, when you think about it, Jesus' birth was a rather ordinary event. Like the billions of human beings who have experienced the birthing process, he was pushed out of his mother's protective womb, down

the birth canal and into our world.

There was nothing special, extraordinary or miraculous about Jesus' development in his mother Mary's womb or his birth. And that is just the point. Jesus' common birth demonstrates that he was not some kind of hybrid ghost or phantom, but a real human being, one of us in every way.

Jesus not a phantom

It may well be that one reason the church began to have an official Christmas celebration, probably first occurring in the congregations at Rome early in the

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fourth century, was to counter the heresy of Christian Gnostic Docetism.¹ One of the heretical claims of the Docetic movement was that Jesus only appeared to be a real human being, but that he was only a phantom—an illusion. He did not have a real physical existence or a human body, so he was not really born as a baby, did not actually die on the cross and was not resurrected bodily.

Docetists rejected the possibility that Jesus had a body and nature like ours because they refused to believe that God, who is perfect, eternal, and spirit could have anything to do with our fallen temporal existence and matter, which they thought was evil. “Most denied the birth of Jesus, which would have put him under the power of the material world,” says historical theologian Justo L. Gonzalez.²

The church had battled against Docetic heresies from its earliest days. The New Testament letter of 1 John reminds believers that Jesus was a real human being, not a mirage: “Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God.” John called every person denying this truth an “antichrist” (1 John 3:2-3).

When the church finally instituted a special

giving gifts, visitations and prophetic pronouncements are all part of this joyous public celebration.

Looking beyond Jesus’ birth

Yet, the fact of Jesus’ human birth is only part of the gospel story of how God has worked out our salvation in him. True enough, Jesus’ birth tells us that the One we worship as Savior lived as a fully human individual in all aspects of his creaturely existence, just as we do.

However, by itself, the birth of Jesus is not the miracle and meaning of who he really is in himself and who he is for us—for all of humanity. As we search for the full meaning and miraculous nature of the “Christmas story,” we are compelled to look deeper into the question of *who* Jesus really was.

Matthew 1:18 tells us that Mary “was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit.” The angel told Joseph, who was betrothed to her in marriage, that she was pregnant not because she had a sexual affair with someone else, but “because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit” (verse 20).

Luke 1:26-38 records the story of the angel Gabriel appearing to Mary and telling her

how she, a virgin, would become pregnant: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God” (verse 35).

While Jesus would be born a real and fully human person, he would also be “Immanuel—which means, ‘God with us’” (Matthew 1:23). Though a real human being, Jesus is also fully God of true God—the Son of God, Jesus Christ, one of three Persons of the God who is Three in One and One in Three.

The Creator God is free and able to enter his creation as one of us and yet retain his divine identity.

Who Jesus really was

The Gospel of John concentrates on Jesus’ divine identity. John says nothing specific about Jesus’ birth. His interest is to show the true identity and eternal nature of the One who became the human being, Jesus. John begins his Gospel before time began, we might say, in order to inform us about Jesus’ existence.

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Christmas festival as a memorial of Jesus’ birth, it fixed in believers’ minds the biblical testimony that he was a real person with a real human body—born as we all are, as flesh and blood, fully human babies. In Christmas, the church was teaching the testimony of the Gospels about Jesus’ humanity. That’s one reason why it’s important for Christians to memorialize Jesus’ human birth as we do during each Advent-Christmas season.

Of course, the church did not invent having what amounts to a public announcement of Jesus’ birth. It was beaten to the punch, we might say, by God himself, who memorialized the birth of Jesus with great public fanfare.

Two of the Gospels, Luke and Matthew, provide many details about his birth. In these accounts, Jesus’ birth is extolled with great pageantry by the announcements of angels, telling the event to common shepherds as well as to individuals of great learning and international religious importance (the “Wise Men”). Singing,

He says: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.”³

John next tells us that the divine Word underwent an absolutely radical and unique change. John describes this historical creative act tersely in a single sentence in verse 14: “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.”

The divine Word (the Son of God or Jesus Christ) became a fertilized egg in Mary’s womb. That cell divided again and again, becoming in time tens of millions of cells, developing into an embryo and then a fetus, and finally resulting in the birth of the infant Jesus, after Mary’s normal, nine-month pregnancy.

Words cannot adequately describe the astonishingly infinite creativity and freedom of God to reach down to us by *becoming one of us*, bringing us the joyous good news of who he is for us and who he has made us to be in Jesus Christ.

From infinite power to human cell

When we turn to the apostle Paul’s letter to the Philippians, we find a further explanation of this profound occurrence—the Incarnation—the “in-fleshing” of the divine Son of God as the man Jesus.

Paul writes, speaking of Jesus Christ: “Being in very nature God, he did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!” (Philippians 2:5-8).

Why would the eternal, all-powerful Son of God put himself through such a profound change, taking on our fallen human nature and mortal body? Paul explains why by telling us that this act of pure love was necessary for our salvation. “You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich [in very nature God], yet for your sakes he became poor [human flesh], so that *you through his poverty might become rich* [receive eternal life]” (2 Corinthians 8:9, italics mine).

What God accomplished in Jesus

There in a nutshell is the greatest story ever told. In this miraculous act of the Word become human flesh, Jesus took on our fallen human nature and recreated it within himself, transforming it into his perfect and righteous human nature. In Jesus’ death on the cross, God wiped away our spiritual fallenness and freed us from the sinfulness that enslaves us. In his bodily resurrection, Jesus was the forerunner of our salvation,

drawing us into the new life of his resurrection. And, finally, at his coming in power and glory, Jesus will end the stranglehold of human death by redeeming our mortal bodies with immortality (1 Corinthians 15:50-54).

All this stems from God’s eternal and inexhaustible love for us. Is it any wonder that Christmas celebration is filled with wonder and awe, as we contemplate the Incarnation of Jesus, our Savior and Lord?

Christian believers do not put their faith in a group of doctrines or a set of logical proofs. They have no faith in fake, ersatz “gods.” They place no false hopes in themselves and do not rest on any “good works” that they perform.

Believers believe in a *living person*—Jesus Christ, who is true God of true God, sent by the Father, and who, with the Father, “lives in” them by the Holy Spirit (John 14:15-21). Each Christian believer says with the apostle Paul: “I am not ashamed, because I know whom I have believed”—Jesus Christ (2 Timothy 1:12).

That is the story of Christmas—the good news of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. ∞

¹ The Greek word *dokētai* that gives us the English “Docetism” means “to seem.” A number of Greek New Testament verses use forms of the word, as in James 1:26: “If any man among you seem [*dokeō*] to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man’s religion is vain.”

² Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, vol. 1 (HarperCollins, 1984), p. 60.

³ Here we are given a truth about the Being of God that stretches our imagination to the utmost. It was not contemplated by human beings before God acted to reveal himself in Jesus. As it turns out, the one divine Being who is God has existed from eternity in three eternal and distinct persons who are of the same essence—Father, Son (the Word who was born as Jesus Christ) and the Holy Spirit.

