

Grace to You :: Unleashing God's Truth One Verse at a Time

The Truth of the Nativity

Scripture: Selected Scriptures

Code: A313

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The story of the first Christmas is so beloved that singers and storytellers across the centuries have embellished and elaborated and mythologized the story in celebration. However, most people now don't know which details are biblical and which are fabricated. People usually imagine the manger scene with snow, singing angels, many worshipers, and a little drummer boy. None of that is found in the biblical account.

Christmas has become the product of an odd mixture of pagan ideas, superstition, fanciful legends, and plain ignorance. Add to that the commercialization of Christmas by marketers and the politicization of Christmas in the culture wars, and you're left with one big mess. Let's try to sort it out. The place to begin is in God's Word, the Bible. Here we find not only the source of the original account of Christmas, but also God's commentary on it.

We can't know Jesus if we don't understand He is real. The story of His birth is no allegory. We dare not romanticize it or settle for a fanciful legend that renders the whole story meaningless. Mary and Joseph were real people. Their dilemma on finding no room at the inn surely was as frightening for them as it would be for you or me. The manger in which Mary laid Jesus must have reeked of animal smells. So did the shepherds, in all probability. That first Christmas was anything but picturesque.

But that makes it all the more wondrous. *That baby in the manger is God! Immanuel!*

That's the heart and soul of the Christmas message. There weren't many worshipers around the original manger--only a handful of shepherds. But one day every knee will bow before Him, and every tongue will confess He is Lord (Philippians 2:9-11). Those who doubt Him, those who are His enemies, those who merely ignore Him--all will one day bow, too, even if it be in judgment.

How much better to honor Him now with the worship He deserves! That's what Christmas ought to inspire.

Unvarnished Truth

Luke 2:7 sets the scene: "[Mary] gave birth to her firstborn son; and she wrapped Him in cloths, and

laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn."

That verse is explicitly concerned with a lonely birth. There were no midwives, no assistance to Mary at all. The Bible doesn't even mention that Joseph was present. Perhaps he was, but if he was typical of first-time fathers, he would have been of little help to Mary. She was basically on her own.

Mary brought forth the child; *she* wrapped Him in swaddling cloths; and *she* laid Him in a manger. Where usually a midwife would clean the baby and wrap Him, there was no one. Mary did it herself. And where usually there would have been a cradle or basket for the baby, there was none. Mary had to put Him in an animal's feeding trough.

When Christ entered the world, He came to a place that had some of the smelliest, filthiest, and most uncomfortable conditions. But that is part of the wonder of divine grace, isn't it? When the Son of God came down from heaven, He came all the way down. He did not hang on to His equality with God; rather, He set it aside for a time and completely humbled Himself (Philippians 2:5-8).

Unlikely Testimony

Luke 2:8-20 describes the experience of the shepherds when Jesus was born. Think about that for a moment. Out of the whole of Jerusalem society, God picked a band of shepherds to hear the news of Jesus' birth. That's intriguing because shepherds were among the lowest and most despised social groups.

The very nature of shepherds' work kept them from entering into the mainstream of Israel's society. They couldn't maintain the ceremonial washings and observe all the religious festivals and feasts, yet these shepherds, just a few miles from Jerusalem, were undoubtedly caring for sheep that someday would be used as sacrifices in the temple. How fitting it is that they were the first to know of the Lamb of God!

More significant, they came to see Him the night he was born. No one else did. Though the shepherds went back and told everyone what they had seen and heard, and though "all who heard it wondered at the things which were told them by the shepherds" (v. 18), not one other person came to see firsthand.

Scripture doesn't describe how the shepherds' search for the baby Jesus actually unfolded, but it's not unreasonable to assume that they entered Bethlehem and asked questions: "Does anybody know about a baby being born here in town tonight?"

The shepherds might have knocked on several doors and seen other newborn babies before they found the special Child lying in the feeding trough. At that moment, those humble men knew for certain that the angels' announcement was a word from God. After their encounter with Joseph and Mary and Jesus, the shepherds couldn't help but tell others about what the angels had told them. They became, in effect, the first New Testament evangelists.

The shepherd's story is a good illustration of the Christian life. You first hear the revelation of the gospel and believe it (Romans 10:9-10). Then you pursue and embrace Christ. And having become a witness to your glorious conversion, you begin to tell others about it (Luke 2:17).

May God grant you the life-changing spiritual experiences and the ongoing attitude of enthusiasm and responsiveness that causes you to tell others that you, too, have seen Christ the Lord.

Adapted from *God's Gift of Christmas*.

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