



Where is the Real Christmas?

James 1:17: *Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning.*

Yesterday was Christmas - or for some it was a winter holiday that was all about some jolly old man from the North Pole bringing presents to all the kids. There were lights, decorations, trees, gifts, food, family, fun and football - and everyone presumably had a good time. The only thing missing? Jesus, the real reason for the season! He may have been out of the loop in a lot of places yesterday, but I can assure you, Jesus has been found and will be heard about for the next two hours! Stay with us as we look at and celebrate the Real Christmas - its drama, its inspiration and its hope.

We now present a six-chapter story to you about Jesus' birth and the events that surrounded it.



How do we keep faith when too much time has gone by?

It had been a long time...a very long time. So long a time, that it had become almost hard to count the years - certainly, no one could remember that far back - not even your father's, father's father was around - it was *that* long ago. All we had were prophecies - old prophecies that spoke about his coming...but they were old, very old...the newest one was over 400 years old!!! And that was the newest one! What did it say? Something dramatic about the Day of the Lord...

Malachi 4:1-2: (NASB) *¹For behold, the day is coming, burning like a furnace; and all the arrogant and every evildoer will be chaff; and the day that is coming will set them ablaze, says the LORD of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. ²But for you who fear My name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings;*

"The sun of righteousness rising with healing" - what a comforting thought in the midst of all the turmoil that the prophecy detailed...there were other prophecies as well - older - some much older but all pointing to the same thing.

Genesis 3:15: (NASB) *And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; He shall bruise you on the head, and you shall bruise him on the heel.*

Wow, that was the oldest prophecy, kind of a veiled promise of redemption for the first sin.

Genesis 22:16-18: (NASB) *¹⁶By Myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this thing and have not withheld your son, your only son, ¹⁷indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens and as the sand which is*



on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies. ¹⁸In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice.

That is another old, old prophecy given to Abraham long before Israel was even a nation. That one gets so much more specific, detailing the blessing of all the nations of all the earth - not just one - or a few, but all!

Isaiah 9:6-7: (NASB) ⁶For 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. ⁷There will be no end to the increase of his government or of peace,

No end of peace? Isn't that what everyone is hoping for, wishing for, working for...? Now that is a prophecy with a lot of hope!

...on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness from then on and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will accomplish this.

So it's the zeal of God that gets it done! But it has still been such a long time - thousands of years. Hmmm... so if God had been silent for the last 400 years, should that be such a problem? What God says, He does! What did he say at the end of Malachi, the last book of the Old Testament?

Malachi 4:5-6: (NASB) ⁵Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the LORD. ⁶He will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers, so that I will not come and smite the land with a curse.

So the last words of the Old Testament essentially tell us how the new Testament is going to start: Before the coming of Messiah there would be the coming of one who would prepare the people for the Messiah, even though hope might be forgotten over time, it does not mean that the giver of all hope forgets!



"Come Thou Long Expected Jesus," Chris Tomlin



Isaiah 42:6-7: (NASB) ⁶I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness, I will also hold you by the hand and watch over you, and I will appoint you as a covenant to the people, as a light to the nations, ⁷to open blind eyes, To bring out prisoners from the dungeon and those who dwell in darkness from the prison.

Deuteronomy 18:15: (NASB) The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your countrymen, you shall listen to him.



What do we do when we are told the seemingly impossible is about to happen?

This chapter is about the experiences of Zacharias and Elizabeth becoming the parents of John the Baptist. The two of them were very faithful and the Scriptures say that they were righteous in the sight of God. Zacharias served the people as a priest of God and in spite of their faithfulness, his wife was childless. As they grew older, so did their hopes and their prayers for children. Yet, they went on with their lives humbly serving their God, until one day when Zacharias was serving in the Temple...

Luke 1:11-13: (NASB) ¹¹... an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the altar of incense. ¹²Zacharias was troubled when he saw the angel, and fear gripped him. ¹³But 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.

There must have been great fear and great exhilaration - all at once!

Just like that, there was an answer to the years of humility and prayer before God. Not only was it an answer, but it was an answer delivered by an angel - a child and it was to be a boy!

Zacharias' mind must have begun to race as the fear subsided. This was impossible - why me? Why here? Why now? Why the angel? Why?

The angel continued...

Luke 1:14-15: (NASB) ¹⁴You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth. ¹⁵For 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.

Okay, so he is going to be special, very special. He will be a great man? He will be filled with the Holy Spirit? How is this possible?

There was more and the angel continued...

Luke 1:16-17: (NASB) ¹⁶And he will turn many of the sons of Israel back to the Lord their God. ¹⁷It 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.

My son will turn the hearts of Israel back to God? How would he do this? He is to be a forerunner to...no, this can't be, for these words are from the prophet Malachi - the last spoken words of a prophet in over 400 years! They were a prophecy of the coming of...wait... my son is to be the forerunner of the Messiah??? I just don't see how this can happen!



So the table was set for the prophecies to come to pass.



"Silent Night," Martina McBride

The doubt was too much for Zacharias. After all, none of this made any logical sense. He faced the angel, for he needed answers. His question, though a bold one in his mind, somehow didn't present such authority once spoken, "How will I know this *for certain*? For I am an old man and my wife is advanced in years."

The angel was quick to respond:

Luke 1:19: (NASB) ¹⁹...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.

I AM GABRIEL! The angels words echoed in Zacharias' mind...I AM GABRIEL! This surely was one of those most high in all of the Almighty's spiritual creation! Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God! Gabriel himself sent to deliver *me* this miraculous news!

I am speaking to Gabriel and I am doubting...

Gabriel continued...

Luke 1:20: (NASB) ²⁰And 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 will be fulfilled in their proper time.

Unable to speak? Even at that very moment, Zacharias felt his speech leave him. Unable to speak! I have been visited by a Holy Angel of the Almighty and can tell no one about it?! Zacharias thought a moment - doubt - doubt in the face of God's power and mercy does bring consequence - but it does not cancel His power and mercy! What a glorious God we have! Praise be unto God!

Luke 1:23-25: (NASB) ²³When the days of his priestly service were ended, he went back home. ²⁴After these days Elizabeth his wife became pregnant, and she kept herself in seclusion for five months, saying, ²⁵This 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.

Even in the face of a long forgotten hope and under the circumstances of unlikely events, God's blessing would take root and grow. Elizabeth took this news with great humility and once pregnant, kept herself in seclusion, perhaps as a precaution due to her age; perhaps as a special time for prayer and meditation; perhaps as a time to marvel at the mercy of God. The will of God is sure and the plan of God is complete, all we need do is wait for His timing.

Later when John is born and Zacharias regains his speech...

Luke 1:67-74: (NASB) ⁶⁷And his father Zacharias was filled with the Holy Spirit, and prophesied, saying: ⁶⁸"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited us and accomplished redemption for His people, ⁶⁹And has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of David His servant— ⁷⁰As He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from of old— ⁷¹Salvation from our enemies, and from the hand of all who hate us; ⁷²To show mercy toward our fathers, and to remember His holy covenant,



⁷³The oath which He swore to Abraham our father, ⁷⁴To grant us that we, being rescued from the hand of our enemies, might serve Him without fear...

There were pieces that needed to be put in place before Jesus' arrival. Certain specific important events needed to happen.



How do we respond to that which IS impossible?

We have seen the results of doubt, perhaps justifiable doubt based upon our own human imperfection. But what about the experience of impossibility - being faced with something so contrary to reason that it resides beyond our imagination? Mary faced such a reality.

Luke 1:26-29: (NASB) ²⁶Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city...called Nazareth, ²⁷to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the descendants of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸And coming in, he said to her, Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you. ²⁹But she was very perplexed at this statement, and kept pondering what kind of salutation this was.

Again we see the angel Gabriel reappearing, now six months after Elizabeth conceived. This time the circumstances were near opposite. Elizabeth had been old and married. Mary was young and only engaged. Gabriel had spoken to the husband the first time, here he spoke to the young bride to be. His greeting was one of great favor, yet Mary's reaction was confused and fearful. The angel, Gabriel? Speaking to me? An angel? For what reason? The angel continued:

Luke 1:30-33: (NASB) ³⁰...Do not be afraid, Mary; for you have found favor with God. ³¹And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus. ³²He 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; ³³and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and his kingdom will have no end.

Questions would have swirled in Mary's head. Me? Have a son? He is to be called the "Son of the Most High?" He is to be a king...FOREVER...? His kingdom will have *no end*? How? Why?

Then the question that needed answering above all else, for faith could perceive of these other things, but this one question could not be fathomed: "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" Gabriel answered:

Luke 1:35-37: (NASB) ³⁵...The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy child shall be called the Son of God. ³⁶And 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. ³⁷For nothing will be impossible with God.



Well, the angel had answered - an answer so unexpected and so out of the ordinary that for most people it would have been overload. For Mary, Gabriel's last words must have rung true in the deepest recesses of her young heart - *for nothing will be impossible with God.*

Luke 1:38: (NASB) *And Mary said, Behold, the bondservant of the Lord; may it be done to me according to your word. And the angel departed from her.*



"Mary did you know," Kenny Rogers

For Joseph, this would have been a unique and fearful dilemma. What should he do? He could have sent Mary away in public shame, but the Scriptures tell us that he was a righteous man and did not want to disgrace her, so he determined to do it privately, as was his right. He slept on the decision, and as he slept, an angel of the Lord came to him in a dream. And the angel said:

Matthew 1:20-21: (NASB) ²⁰...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. ²¹She will bear a Son; and you shall call his name Jesus, for He will save his people from their sins.

Here was an explanation, though seemingly far-fetched, that carried with it clear direction and a Godly purpose. The angel continued:

Matthew 1:22-23: (NASB) ²²Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ²³"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."

Joseph awoke and thought a moment... This was *not* some far-fetched explanation at all, rather it was a fulfillment of prophecy! Not just any prophecy, but THE prophecy of THE MESSIAH! Mary, my espoused, was carrying the savior of all and I, Joseph, would have the opportunity to raise him to manhood! Glory to God!

And so we can see how a fear of the unknown can, by the grace and overruling power of God, be turned to faith through the unknown. For Mary and Joseph, this would be their experience.

Let us read what Mary said when she visited Elizabeth upon being given this most precious gift of mothering the son of God:

Luke 1:46-55: (NASB) ⁴⁶And Mary said: My soul exalts the Lord, ⁴⁷And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior. ⁴⁸For He has had regard for the humble state of His bondservant; For behold, from this time on all generations will count me blessed. ⁴⁹For the Mighty One has done great things for me; and holy is His name. ⁵⁰and His mercy is upon generation after generation toward those who fear Him. ⁵¹He has done mighty deeds with His arm; He has scattered those who were proud in the thoughts of their heart. ⁵²He has brought down rulers from their thrones, and has exalted those who were humble. ⁵³He has filled the hungry with good things; and sent away the rich empty-handed. ⁵⁴He has





given help to Israel His servant, in remembrance of His mercy, ⁵⁵as He spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and his descendants forever."



How do we not only grasp, but always remember the miracle of a new life?

Think of the greatest joys of life that you have ever heard of or experienced and inevitably, you will think about the birth of a child. This is an event that marks an end and a beginning. It is the end of a 9-month pregnancy that literally has a physical attachment needing to be cut; and it marks the beginning of a new, viable human life, whose attachments can now grow exponentially and in all directions. Any birth is a miracle, but the birth of Jesus - now that was a miracle of Biblical proportions - for the heavens were alive with joy and celebration...miracle of miracles...!



"Hark the Herald Angels Sing," Chris Tomlin

Luke 2:1-5: (KJV) ¹And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. ²... ³And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. ⁴And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem;...⁵To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child. ⁶And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered.

The experience of Mary and Joseph was one of complete normality. There were no special provisions, no special exemptions, no special circumstances. They were required to do what everyone else did. They had to travel where everyone else traveled and pay what everyone else paid.

Luke 2:7: (KJV) And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.

To be born in a stable and to be laid in a manger among the animals was the most fitting of places for the Lord of men to enter the world. After all, Jesus would live these humble beginnings each and every day for 33½ years, for it was through this humility that he would be able to pay the ransom price.

Luke 2:8-12: (KJV) ⁸And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. ¹⁰And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. ¹¹For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord. ¹²And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.



The fulfillment of prophecy required an angelic announcement to the most humble audience of shepherds. This was fitting - the baby Jesus would grow to assume the throne of David, once a shepherd himself.

Luke 2:13: (KJV) *And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, ¹⁴Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.*

Humility does not preclude heavenly celebration, rather it provokes it! In this manner was Jesus our Lord born.



"O Come All Ye Faithful," Chris Tomlin



How do we show appreciation for a gift that is undeserved?

We have been given a great gift. It is actually more than a gift, for without it we as a race would live without hope, for this gift is the gift of a ransomed life. It is the gift of **redemption**, freely given to every man woman and child who has ever breathed. It is a gift of such magnitude that it will take an eternity to say thank you.

For now, we say thank you in small ways, sometimes seemingly insignificant ways, yet God knows our hearts. What may seem insignificant to us is of great magnitude to God.



"What Child is This?" Martina McBride

The gifts of the three wise men were significant:

- **Gold** represented obedience and consecration;
- **Frankincense** represented praise, devotion, heart adoration, appreciation and gratitude;
- **Myrrh** represented submission, a willingness for service to the extent of bitterness and suffering.



Sometimes the greatest "thank you" we can give is the gift of recognition, looking behind us and recognizing that the plan of God has unfolded; looking around us and recognizing that the plan of God IS unfolding; and looking before us to anticipate the plan of God continuing to unfold.



Recognition of a gift - that's what Simeon did just eight days after Jesus' birth:
Luke 2:21-24: (NASB) ²¹*And when eight days had passed, before His circumcision, His name was then called Jesus, the name given by the angel before He was conceived in the womb.* ²²*And when the days for their purification...were completed, they brought Him up to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord...* ²⁴*and to offer a sacrifice according to what was said in the Law of the Lord...*

Again this reminds us that Mary, Joseph and Jesus are given no special entitlement or dispensation; they are simply given opportunity to show and live their faith.

Luke 2:25-26: (NASB) ²⁵*And there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; and this man was righteous and devout, looking for the consolation of Israel; and the Holy Spirit was upon him.* ²⁶*And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ.*

Here was a man who had *not* forgotten hope, who had *not* allowed doubt or fear to rule his heart; rather he lived in anticipation and expectation of God's gift.

Luke 2:27-29: (NASB) ²⁷*And he came in the Spirit into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to carry out for him the custom of the Law,* ²⁸*then he took him into his arms, and blessed God, and said,* ²⁹*Now Lord, you are releasing your bond-servant to depart in peace, according to your word;*

Being aged, the only thing Simeon looked forward to in his life was a glimpse - just a glimpse - of God's gift of redemption. He sees the baby, takes him in his arms and knows that his life is now complete. For in my arms I hold the hope of the world!



Jesus as a Young Jew, Rembrandt

Luke 2:30-33: (NASB) ³⁰*For my eyes have seen your salvation,* ³¹*Which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,* ³²*A light of revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel.* ³³*And his father and mother were amazed at the things which were being said about him.*

Simeon realizes the full import of redemption - I have seen your salvation - with my own eyes! He is a light that even reaches to all Gentiles. He is a light that is the Glory of Israel! This light is now just a baby, but this baby is the hope of the world!

Luke 2:34-35: (NASB) ³⁴*And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and for a sign to be opposed—* ³⁵*and a sword will pierce even your own soul—to the end that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.*

Simeon also knew that with great accomplishment comes great sacrifice... sometimes heart-breaking sacrifice.



"Now That I Have Held Him," Michael Card



How do we capture all of these lessons for our journey forward?

Up to this point we have seen angels, miracles, and prophecy fulfilled. We have seen forgotten hope, doubt and fear. We have seen the joy of life and the joy of God's gift, we have seen faith and fulfillment. All of these things, and yet we have only looked upon the circumstances surrounding the birth of the infant Jesus. His life - yet to be lived, his humility - yet to be discovered, his ransom price - yet to be paid. Why all of these magnificent events before his life? *Because every journey of significance needs ample preparation to see it through.*

Let's go back to the shepherds who were told of Jesus' birth:

Luke 2:15-20: (NASB) ¹⁵When the angels had gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds began saying to one another, Let us go straight to Bethlehem then, and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has made known to us. ¹⁶So they came in a hurry and found their way to Mary and Joseph, and the baby as he lay in the manger.

These shepherds knew that they were part of something much bigger than they had ever conceived to be possible. They acted in faith, and they acted right away and found Mary and Joseph. The baby lay quietly in a manger. Think of the tranquility and peace of the moment as they lay their eyes on their future Savior...this was Jesus, the one who would save the world!



"Unto Us a Son is Born," Messiah Vocal

Luke 2:17-18: (NASB) ¹⁷When they had seen this, they made known the statement which had been told them about this child. ¹⁸And all who heard it wondered at the things which were told them by the shepherds.

To go and see him was one thing, to take this miracle and publish it amongst the people - that was another! These were just shepherds!

Luke 2:19-20: (NASB) ¹⁹But Mary treasured all these things, pondering them in her heart. ²⁰The shepherds went back, glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen, just as had been told them.

For Mary, this was a time of awestruck wonder. She had been living in faith for the last nine months and now that Jesus was born, her faith would begin to take on new meaning. All that she saw she treasured, for it told her what Jesus would be.

There is little written about Jesus before his thirtieth birthday and the beginning of his ministry. We can assume that his childhood experiences were filled with important lessons of faith, life and purpose. Let's look in on the one experience we do know about when he was a very young man:



Luke 2:42-44: (NASB) ⁴²And when he became twelve, they went up according to the custom of the Feast; ⁴³and as they were returning, after spending the full number of days, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem. But his parents were unaware of it, ⁴⁴but supposed him to be in the caravan, and went a day's journey; and they began looking for him among their relatives and acquaintances.

We could look at this and say, well there's a typical 12-year old boy, preoccupied and not paying attention! Ah, how far off we would be with such a judgment.

Luke 2:45-48: (NASB) ⁴⁵When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem looking for him. ⁴⁶Then, after three days they found him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the teachers, both listening to them and asking them questions. ⁴⁷And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. ⁴⁸When they saw him, they were astonished; and his mother said to him, Son, why have you treated us this way? Behold, your father and I have been anxiously looking for you.

This had gotten serious... missing for a day and then an additional three days looking throughout Jerusalem! I imagine they would have looked in all of the typical places, and I imagine that their anxiety and grief over their lost son would have been almost too much to bear. And then there he was, found safe!

Luke 2:49-52: (NASB) ⁴⁹And he said to them, Why is it that you were looking for me? Did you not know that I had to be in my Father's house? ⁵⁰But they did not understand the statement which he had made to them...and his mother treasured all these things in her heart. ⁵²And Jesus kept increasing in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.

Now here is a curious thing. Jesus is bewildered! What? Didn't you know where I would be? All of the things you have taught me about doing my Father's will - I'm doing them! I am in my Father's house, learning about His business. Of course I am here, I could be no other place!

All of this from a 12-year old boy. And Mary treasured these things in her heart as she watched her baby grow from the infant that angels sang about, to the boy seeking his God, to the man who would save the world.



"O Holy Night," Celtic Woman

So, there we have the Real Christmas - the real story about the real birth of the real savior.

The six chapters presented here this morning are meant to inspire you to a greater appreciation of Jesus and his mission as the Son of God, coming to this earth to "pay a debt he didn't owe, because we owed a debt we could not pay."

Merry, merry Christmas to you all!

*So, where is the real Christmas?
For Jonathan and Rick and Christian Questions...
Think about it...!*

