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When my younger daughter was about 12, she took figure skating lessons. She got pretty good, too. Since we were always at the rink about two hours, I’d bring work with me. One day a girl who sometimes skated with my daughter sat down beside me. She asked me what I was doing, and I told her I was editing an article about Jesus. “I know a little about Him,” she said.

Truth be told, she knew nothing. She didn’t know the Christmas story; and she certainly didn’t know that Jesus was God incarnate who came to die in our place, enabling us to have forgiveness of sin through faith in Him.

So I used the colors of her clothing and mine to tell her the story of Jesus: Yellow or gold stood for heaven, where God lives; a dark color stood for sin, which separates us from God and keeps us out of heaven; red stood for Christ’s blood, which He shed for us by taking the punishment we deserve; and white stood for His resurrection and how He washes our sins away, if we ask Him, and makes us clean so that we can go to heaven.

There’s a little more to this method of presenting the gospel, but those are the basics.

What is more wonderful than the gospel? Every time I read Luke 2:11, a great peace washes over me: “For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” We have a Savior! Someone who can reconcile us to God, make a home for us in heaven, and give us peace that passes all understanding regardless of our circumstances.

Christmas is my favorite holiday. Not because of gifts (we rarely give gifts in my family now, praise God) and not because of the big hubbub that surrounds the season but, rather, because this is the time of year we specifically set aside to praise and thank the Father for sending us His Son.

How perfectly God orchestrated every tiny detail. He is a God of precision. In this issue of Israel My Glory, we focus on that precision and how He arranged a multitude of circumstances to bring into this troubled and needy world the only One who could take away our sins.

This Christmas, let’s share the gospel with as many people as possible and focus on thanking our great God for His everlasting love. Merry Christmas from all of us at Israel My Glory magazine.

Waiting for His Appearing,
Lorna Simcox
Editor-in-Chief
As I travel and speak, people often tell me they no longer hear teaching about Israel and Bible prophecy in their churches. Their comments reveal two distinct realities: (1) There once was a time when they did hear such teaching in church, and (2) preaching what God says about Israel and prophecy has fallen out of favor.

As a pastor’s son, I realize many topics need to be addressed from the pulpit, and pastors have less time than ever to communicate God’s truth. In many churches, the pastor has merely 30 to 45 minutes on the weekend to speak to his flock. Without the Sunday evening services and midweek Bible studies that were the norm in many churches in bygone years, Sunday morning has become the pastor’s only time to teach the Word to his congregation.

Given such limitations—and with the ever-growing emphasis on Reformed Theology in many circles—the value of studying Israel and prophecy has diminished.

But there is a cost to neglecting the study and teaching of this significant part of God’s counsel. A consequence is that fewer people in the pews stand behind Israel and the Jewish people.

A LifeWay Research survey of evangelical Christians has revealed that millennials, those ages 18 to 34, are less supportive of Israel than any other generation. According to LifeWay, only 58 percent favor Israel compared to 76 percent of evangelicals who are over 65. Millennials are the ones who did not grow up being taught prophecy. This is a troubling trend because Israel’s strongest Gentile supporters are evangelical Christians; but that may not be the case in the future.

I hear some people say studying prophecy is a waste of time because it divides people. They believe preaching Christ is what is necessary to save and unite people. When I visited the Ark Encounter in Williamstown, Kentucky, earlier this year, I was struck by the fact that Noah, whom God calls “a preacher of righteousness” (2 Pet. 2:5), warned the world of God’s impending judgment and the only way to escape it. When Noah preached, he was teaching prophecy—a message of future judgment given to him by God. The judgment had not yet occurred, but it was certain to come because God said so.

When we preach prophecy today, we, too, are warning people that a judgment of God will someday fall on this world for its rebellion against Him; and the only way to escape it is through faith in His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ. When the church fails to teach prophecy, Christians fail to obtain a fully developed worldview and are unable to see all that God is doing to redeem the world. They lose the vital connection with Israel and fail to warn others of their need to avoid God’s judgment through faith in Jesus. This consequence is the greatest cost of not teaching what God says about Israel and prophecy. For you see, God’s redemptive plan goes through Israel. Israel is the conduit of our blessings—past, present, and future.

A few days before Jesus went to the cross, He said the days leading to His return will be like the days of Noah. People will be focused on enjoying life and ignoring God’s warning of judgment until it is too late (Mt. 24:38–39). It may just be that we are living in days like Noah’s, as Jesus’ return is drawing very near.
Somehow Israel always seems to find itself in the middle of a controversy. Israel’s parliament recently passed a bill called the Jewish Nation-State Law, and immediately it made headlines around the world.

American news-and-opinion website Vox posted this headline online: “Israel’s hugely controversial ‘nation-state’ law, explained.” ABC News’s headline read, “Israel passes controversial Jewish nation-state law.” NBC News wrote, “Israel ‘nation-state’ law prompts criticism around the world, including from U.S. Jewish groups”; and Time magazine wrote, “Israel’s Nation-State Law Is an Affront to Democracy.”

The purpose of the new law is to enshrine Israel as a Jewish state. If you didn’t know any better, you might think this law is absolutely scandalous. But what’s so controversial about calling Israel a Jewish state? Israel was designed to be a Jewish state.

Article 2 of the League of Nations’ “Mandate for Palestine,” a legal document that took effect in 1923 and made Great Britain the ruling power in Palestine, declared, “The Mandatory shall be responsible for placing the country under such political, administrative and economic conditions as will secure the establishment of the Jewish national home.”

That said, the Jewish Nation-State Law solidifies basic national claims for all of Israel’s citizens, including Arab Israelis.

It states that Israel is the historic homeland of the Jewish people, and Jewish people have a right to self-determination. Israel will remain the country’s name, and “Hatikvah” (“The Hope”) will remain Israel’s national anthem. Hebrew is the national language, but Arabic maintains a “special status” among the many languages spoken in the country. Finally, the state flag is white with two blue stripes near the edges and a blue Star of David in the center.

The law merely states the obvious: Israel is a Jewish democracy.

The Jewish Nation-State Law was created to preserve Israel’s Jewish identity amid growing anti-Israel rhetoric that seeks to erode the country of its Jewishness. The dissenting voices come primarily from Israel’s progressive left and anti-Israel Arab citizens. For them, Israel’s Jewishness hinders non-Jews from feeling fully connected to Israeli society.

Yousef Jabareen, an Arab-Israeli member of Israel’s Knesset, believes the new law “encourages hatred against Arabs and enables exclusion.” But Mr. Jabareen is a living testimony that the opposite is true. He is one of many Arab-Israeli politicians who have equal voices in Israel’s democracy. Israeli law offers equal voting rights to all citizens and is one of the few countries in the Middle East that permit Arab women to vote.

The Jewish democracy Israelis want to protect elects Arab-Israelis to Israel’s supreme court and encourages Arab citizens to get degrees in Israeli universities and invest Israeli money in building technology parks in Arab towns to help close the income gap between the Arab and Jewish communities. Israel’s democracy seems to provide more opportunities for minorities than Syria, Jordan, and Iraq give to the majority of their own people.

Israel’s founders dreamed of a state that would be a safe haven for Jewish people—where they would no longer be persecuted for being Jewish and could enjoy the same rights as non-Jews. That’s why the Declaration of Independence established Israel as a Jewish state, while still providing the same rights and privileges to citizens irrespective of religion, race, or sex. The Declaration guarantees freedom of religion, conscience, language, education, and culture, while protecting the holy places of all religions.

The Jewish Nation-State Law is not an impediment to democracy; it protects what makes Israel the most open society in the Middle East.

If controversy is what you’re looking for, look north of Israel, where more than a half million Syrians have been murdered in a civil war. Look southwest, where Christians in Egypt suffer unprecedented persecution from Islamic extremists. Look east at Jordan’s impending economic ruin. Look south to the Sudan and its Darfur genocide. But don’t look to Israel, where a Jewish democracy makes the Jewish state the freest society in the Middle East.

by Chris Katulka
THE FLAP OVER ISRAEL’S NATION-STATE LAW

The Knesset recently enacted a new law that declares Israel is the historic homeland of the Jewish people and that they have an exclusive right to national self-determination in it. The so-called Nation-State Law establishes Hebrew as the official language of Israel and declares Jerusalem the country’s official capital. It also asserts that the development of Jewish settlements is a national interest that will be encouraged, promoted, and consolidated.

Proponents of the law say the law is necessary to guarantee Israel’s future as a Jewish country. It now enshrines Israel’s Jewish identity into the Basic Laws, which serve as Israel’s de facto constitution. Previously, Israel’s Jewish identity was embodied only in its 1948 Declaration of Independence, which has no constitutional value.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu hailed the Nation-State Law as a “pivotal moment” in the annals of Zionism and the history of Israel: “We enshrined in law the basic principle of our existence. Israel is the nation-state of the Jewish people, which respects the individual rights of all its citizens. This is our state—the Jewish state. In recent years there have been some who have attempted to put this in doubt, to undercut the core of our being. Today we made it law: This is our nation, language, and flag.”

The new law sparked an outcry from civil-rights organizations and others who argue that it discriminates against Israel’s Arab minority and favors Israel’s Jewish identity at the expense of democracy. Ahmad Tibi, an Arab Knesset member who belongs to the Joint List party (a coalition of Arab parties), denounced the law as “the end of democracy and the official beginning of fascism and apartheid.”

The European Union claims the law harms the prospects for a “two-state solution” to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, even though the basic premise has always been a Jewish state existing alongside an Arab state.

In fact, the law is designed to blunt the consequences of a “one-state solution,” which would merge Israel, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip into one big country—one in which Arabs would outnumber Jews. The Nation-State Law ensures that Israel cannot be easily transformed into a binational state.

“We are enshrining this important bill into a law today to prevent even the slightest thought, let alone attempt, to transform Israel to a country of all its citizens,” said Knnesset Member Avi Dichter, the law’s sponsor.

A recent rally in Tel Aviv seemed to prove his point. The demonstration at Rabin Square, ostensibly called to protest the Nation-State Law, quickly turned into a rally for Palestinian nationalism. Dozens of activists from the Arab Knesset party Balad, one of the four factions in the Knesset’s Joint List party, were waving Palestinian flags and chanting, “With blood and fire, we will redeem Palestine,” and “Millions of martyrs are marching to Jerusalem.”

Former MK Mohammad Barakeh, a longtime leader of the Hadash party and current head of the Higher Arab Monitoring Committee, a nongovernmental umbrella organization that represents Israel’s Arab community in the political sphere, told the crowd the demonstrators were at the square to “erase this abomination and remove the stain made by Netanyahu and his government called the nation-state law.” He said the Palestinian flag is the “flag of the oppressed Palestinian people, the flag they are trying to eradicate from history via the nation-state law.”

Netanyahu said the events show that many Israeli-Arabs want to “turn Israel into an Israeli-Palestinian state,” which proves the new law is necessary. Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked added, “PLO flags in Rabin Square last night prove that this is not a matter of equal civil rights because they clearly exist. This is about equal nationality, and that will never be.”

by Soeren Kern,
a senior fellow at the Gatestone Institute, a nonpartisan foreign-policy think tank based in New York City
**IRAN** — “We told them many times that Jesus is our Lord and you cannot take Him away from us,” Iranian Christian Marziyeh Amirizadeh told the audience at the recent Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom event in Washington, D.C. She was referring to the words she told her captors in Tehran’s brutal Evin Prison, where she and her friend Maryam Rostampour spent 259 days in 2009 imprisoned for their faith.

Amirizadeh and Rostampour shared their experiences of imprisonment in Iran and encouraged Christians to stand up for religious freedom and the rights of their persecuted brothers and sisters around the world. “Hundreds of Christians have been arrested by Iranian authorities and charged with disrupting national security for being a Christian and participating in home churches, receiving prison sentences of 2 to 10 years,” Rostampour said.

Amirizadeh and Rostampour were raised in Muslim families and became Christians as young adults, christianpost.com reported. They became friends when they met in 2005 in Turkey, where they studied theology together, christianpost.com reported.

They returned home to Iran in 2009, and government authorities arrested them on charges of apostasy, blasphemy, and promoting Christianity in Iran, christianpost.com reported. “Since Islam is the only official religion in Iran, government authorities forbid other religious minorities from practicing their faith,” Amirizadeh said. They deem those who leave Islam as apostates and infidels, worthy of torture and death, she said.

Iranian officials sent them to Evin Prison, notorious for its brutality and torture, and sentenced them to death by hanging. The women said they endured daily interrogations, the withholding of medical treatment that was available to other prisoners, routine threatening of their lives and their families’ lives, and the mental torture of viewing the beating and physical abuse of other prisoners.

“The only thing that helped us stand on our faith was our personal relationship with Jesus and the love of God that we have experienced in our lives,” Amirizadeh said.

The advocacy of government and Christian groups eventually provided enough international pressure to demand Iran release the women. But the women said that as the Iranian officials reluctantly set them free, they warned them they would be secretly killed in an “accidental” death, christianpost.com said. “You will die in an accident.” “Your house may catch on fire,” the officials warned, providing names of pastors whom they secretly killed after their release.

Rostampour and Amirizadeh fled Iran in 2010 after their release. “We believe we are alive today because of Jesus’ power and His miracles,” Rostampour told the Washington audience.

Despite the Iranian government’s pressure to suppress Christianity, Christianity is spreading, Rostampour said. Most Iranians are fed up with their current government, viewing it as corrupt and oppressive, christianpost.com reported. “Our hope and prayer for our country is that one day Iran will be a free country, ruled by a democratic government,” Rostampour said. “We hope for a day when all religious minorities can meet together in peace without having the fear of getting harassed, arrested, tortured, or killed by the government.”

Iran ranks 10th on Open Doors’ 2018 World Watch List of the 50 countries where Christians experience the worst persecution.
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Vice President for Ministry Advancement
This Christmas season, as we gather in our churches to worship our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and sing the carols of Christmas, we no doubt will sing “O Little Town of Bethlehem,” one of the most beloved hymns of all time.

Its author, Phillips Brooks, visited Bethlehem in the winter of 1865, just after the American Civil War, while he was rector of the Church of the Holy Trinity in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He made the long trip to assist at the Christmas Eve service in the Church of the Nativity.

Today, Bethlehem lies within the jurisdiction of the Palestinian Authority (PA), as it has since 1995. That year at Christmastime, then PA President Yasser Arafat (a man who never let the truth get in his way) stood on the roof of the Church of the Nativity and proudly proclaimed, “Welcome to Bethlehem, birthplace of the first Palestinian Christian, Jesus Christ.”

In December 2013, PA President Mahmoud Abbas declared Jesus was “a Palestinian messenger who would become a guiding light for millions around the world.”

This year, again in Bethlehem, PA Foreign Minister Riyad JEWISH TOWN OF BETHLEHEM WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY—AND THE LITTLE TOWN OF BETHLEHEM?
al-Maliki called Jesus “a Palestinian, and Palestine was his birthplace.”

These unbiblical declarations aren’t surprising, given the history of the Palestinian Authority. In addition, Arafat and Abbas were addressing Palestinian audiences during the Christmas season.

However, Maliki’s speech was different. He spoke in Bethlehem by invitation of an international “Christian” audience at a Bible college conference sponsored by a “Christian” organization called Christ at the Checkpoint, whose theme was “Christ at the Center”; and unbelievably, the audience applauded.

The PA is certainly no beacon of scriptural truth. The fact the conference even invited Maliki is troubling. But the fact that a so-called evangelical Christian audience chose political expedience over clear biblical reality is even worse.

The conference's website, christatthecheckpoint.bethbc.edu, identifies its participants as “evangelical Christians” who desire “truth” to “reign”: “We also call upon evangelical Christians everywhere to join us in the hope that we can build a better world where goodness and truth reign free and where the love and fairness of God are common.”

Based on Maliki’s warm reception, biblical truth has little chance of surviving there.

PA officials are known for blatantly mischaracterizing clear Bible teaching for political purposes. But believers have no excuse for applauding blatant lies about their Savior—in Bethlehem of Judea, no less.

THE REAL STORY

Bethlehem has a long attachment to biblical truth and to the Jewish people. It is referred to 30 times in the Old Testament and eight times in the New. Scripture sometimes calls the town Bethlehem Ephrathah or Bethlehem of Judea to distinguish it from another Bethlehem located in the north, within the tribe of Zebulun (Josh. 19:15–16).

Bethlehem is first referenced at the death of Rachel, Jacob’s wife, who died giving birth to Benjamin: “So Rachel died and was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem)” (Gen. 35:19). As a result, Jewish people regard Bethlehem as a holy place—especially for barren women who go to Rachel’s Tomb to pray for children.

The book of Ruth opens with a famine in Bethlehem, a town within the tribe of Judah (Mic. 5:2). In the New Testament, Bethlehem was sometimes called the “city of David” (Lk. 2:4, 11). King David was Ruth’s great-grandson. He was born in Bethlehem; and, according to 1 Samuel 16, the prophet Samuel anointed him king of Israel there.

Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem fulfilled Micah’s prophecy: “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to Me the One to be Ruler in Israel, whose goings forth are from of old, from everlasting (Mic. 5:2).

In addition, Matthew 2:3–5 records King Herod asking Jewish chief priests and scribes where the Christ (Messiah) was to be born. They answered, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it is written by the prophet” (v. 5).

Thus, at the time of Christ, the little town of Bethlehem was far from Palestinian. The prophet Micah was Jewish; and Jesus, who fulfilled Micah’s prophecy 500 years after it was given, was also Jewish.

The first Palestinian Christian? No. Jesus the Son of God was born of a Jewish maiden in a manger in Bethlehem of Judea. His birth was prophesied by a Jewish prophet and recorded by a Jewish disciple.

It’s a shame that “Christians” who traveled from far and wide to attend a Christ at the Center conference this year scorned biblical truth but willingly embraced a lie. Christ was not born in the little town of Bethlehem of Palestine. He was born a Jew in fulfillment of prophecies Almighty God gave to the Jewish people, including this one:

And now the Lord says, who formed Me from the womb to be His Servant, to bring Jacob back to Him, so that Israel is gathered to Him, . . . “It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also give You as a light to the Gentiles, that You should be My salvation to the ends of the earth” (Isa. 49:5–6).

Phillips Brooks traveled to Bethlehem because the Bible says Jesus, who came to provide salvation “to the ends of the earth,” was born as a Jewish baby in the Jewish town of Bethlehem. What a pity the Christ at the Checkpoint participants could not embrace the biblical truth Pastor Brooks embraced.

As we celebrate Christmas this year, my prayer is that we always stay true to God’s Word—particularly when it’s unpopular. Merry Christmas!

ENDNOTE

1 “Christ at the Checkpoint 5. Jesus Christ at the Center: About Christ at the Checkpoint” <christatthecheckpoint.bethbc.edu/about-christ-at-the-checkpoint>.
A NIGHT
THE KING IS BORN!
AND WHO RECEIVES THE
BIRTH ANNOUNCEMENT?
NOT THE PEOPLE YOU
MIGHT THINK.

IN THE FIELDS

BY DAVID M. LEVY
Birth announcements are exciting. Parents share the news first with family, then with close friends, and later with the community. In the first century, however, it was unthinkable to send birth announcements to the poor and to those who held lower-class occupations, like shepherds, because such people were often considered outcasts in society.

But God does things differently than man. God bypassed the priests, scribes, and men of wealth and stature to announce Jesus the Messiah’s birth to common shepherds.

The angels must have been amazed beyond words when they witnessed the Creator of the universe being born as a baby (cf. Col. 1:16–17; 1 Tim. 3:16). But they must have been even more surprised God asked them to announce the birth to lowly shepherds (cf. Isa. 55:9).

THE SHEPHERDS
The Gospel writer Luke wrote, “Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night” (Lk. 2:8). Though the Bible does not date this event, shepherds in Bethlehem guarded their sheep in the fields day and night from March to November. They lived outside, protecting the flocks from wild animals and poachers. Some scholars speculate the sheep these particular shepherds watched were reserved for Temple sacrifices, but the text does not indicate the sheep’s use or destination.

Society and rabbinic Jews despised shepherding and looked at shepherds with disdain, just as the Egyptians did in Joseph’s day (cf. Gen. 46:34). People considered shepherds heathen, did not allow them to serve as court witnesses, and refused to give them charity. They were often considered to be thieves, dishonest and untrustworthy, and were under a rabbinic ban because they also were considered ceremonially unclean. Such attitudes developed because shepherds were uneducated (especially in the Mosaic Law) and were therefore deemed a lower class of Israelite.

But this view is not scriptural. In fact, Scripture speaks favorably of shepherds and presents them as humble people. Abraham, Moses, David, and Amos were all shepherds; and Scripture calls the Lord Jesus Christ our “good shepherd,” the “great Shepherd,” and the “Chief Shepherd” (Jn. 10:11; Heb. 13:20; 1 Pet. 5:4).

On the night of Jesus’ birth, an angel suddenly appeared to the shepherds, and they were immediately terrified: “And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid” (Lk. 2:9). This was a startling, unsettling fear, similar to what Zacharias and Mary experienced when an angel appeared to them (1:12, 29).

Scripture doesn’t identify the angel the shepherds saw. (The angel Gabriel appeared to Mary and Joseph.) With the angel’s appearance came a bright presence of glory that surrounded the shepherds, and “a multitude of the heavenly host” joined the angel in praising God (2:13–14).

THE PRONOUNCEMENTS
The angel made several pronouncements to the shepherds:

First, he addressed the shepherds’ fear: “Then the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people’” (v. 10). The angel immediately wanted to calm and comfort the shepherds, since fear always accompanied such shocking angelic appearances (cf. 1:13, 30; 5:10). But the shepherds probably continued to tremble from the experience.

The angel said he came to announce “good tidings,” which means good news. He also said the message would bring “great joy” (since Jesus the Messiah brings fullness of joy to those who accept Him; Jn. 15:11; 16:24; 1 Jn. 1:4) and that the message was specifically for Israel (Jesus is Israel’s promised Messiah) but also was meant for “all people” throughout the world.

Second, the angel announced the Savior’s birth: “For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (Lk. 2:11). He said the Savior’s birthplace was the “city of David, which is called Bethlehem” (v. 4; cf. Mic. 5:2).
He also spoke of Christ’s preeminence, calling Him the “Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (Lk. 2:11). Jesus’ three titles—Christ, Savior, and Lord—appear together here. The word Savior speaks of Christ’s ability to deliver, or rescue, both Jewish people and Gentiles physically and spiritually through Jesus’ foreordained death on the cross for humanity’s sin. Christ’s atoning work applies to all who receive Him personally as Savior and Lord.

The word Christ (Messiah) refers to His Messianic office as the anointed King of Israel who will sit on the throne of His ancestor King David and reign over the house of Jacob forever. His Kingdom will never end (cf. 1:32–33).

The word Lord speaks of His rank as “LORD OF LORDS” (Rev. 19:16) and refers to His absolute sovereignty and divine authority over everything in the universe.

Third, the angel revealed the sign of Christ’s birth: “And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger” (Lk. 2:12). He directed the shepherds to a place of humble surroundings where they did not see a magnificently arrayed infant-king but, rather, a mere baby in an animal stable wrapped in nondescript “swaddling cloths” (narrow strips of material wrapped around infants to restrict movement)—hardly the garments of a prince or king.

Nor did Jesus lie in a crib fit for a king. He lay in a manger, an animal feeding trough. It was an unclean place, hardly fit for a newborn baby, let alone the Messiah. But Jesus’ humble birth mirrored His entire life on earth. Though He was a king, He came as a servant:

Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bond servant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross (Phil. 2:5–8).

From birth to death on a cross between two thieves, Christ’s life demonstrated humility (cf. Mt. 27:38; Lk. 9:58; 2 Cor. 8:9). The angel’s announcement concluded with a choir of angels: “And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!’” [men of His good pleasure] (Lk. 2:13–14).

Scripture doesn’t indicate the praise included musical accompaniment or that the angels hovered over the shepherds; but the praise, though short, was extremely significant. The angels (1) praised God and (2) bestowed “peace, goodwill toward men.” Their words, glory to God in the highest, offered God praise in the highest place (heaven), as contrasted to earth where humans were to receive God’s peace. God deserved praise for bestowing His love, mercy, and grace on sinful men by sending Jesus to provide salvation. Thus heaven praised God for the salvation that made it possible for people to be saved; experience reconciliation with God; and receive the peace that is of, with, and from God.

THE SEARCH

After the angels departed, the shepherds discussed the unusual revelation and departed for nearby Bethlehem to find the Messiah:

So it was, when the angels had gone away from them into heaven, that the shepherds said to one another, “Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us.” And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger (vv. 15–16).

Notice the passage mentions Mary before Joseph, probably because she was the focus of this account and gave birth to Jesus, as the angel Gabriel had prophesied (1:26–57; 2:1–7).

When the shepherds arrived in Bethlehem, they knew what to look for: a newborn wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in an animal feeding trough. And that was what they found (2:12). This confirmation sealed their faith that Jesus was the promised Messiah whom God had sent for the salvation of Israel and the world.

THE SHARING

Then the shepherds “made widely known the saying which was told them concerning this Child” (v. 17). Though they held a pitifully low social status in Israel, they became the first preachers of the Messiah by simply relaying to people what they had seen and heard.

People responded to the shepherds’ message with wonder: “And all those who heard it marveled at those things which were told them by the shepherds” (v. 18). The fact they marveled does not mean they came to faith, but it means they expressed surprise at what the shepherds had revealed.

Mary’s response was quite different: “Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart” (v. 19). The word kept means to guard. Mary guarded and treasured what had happened to her—Gabriel’s revelation, the shepherds’ visit, and the birth of Jesus. She probably scrutinized every detail. The word pondered means Mary weighed, compared, and continually contemplated every moment of her entire experience.

Then the shepherds “returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told them” (v. 20). They returned to Jerusalem full of joy, “glorifying and praising God,” full of renewed faith. God had blessed them with the extraordinary privilege of being the first to witness the beginning of a new work through Jesus the Messiah.

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THE INCREDIBLE INCARNATION

ISRAEL MY GLORY
WHEN JESUS STEPPED DOWN FROM HEAVEN TO BE BORN IN A MANGER, HE DID MORE THAN MOST PEOPLE REALIZE.

BY LARRY MITCHELL
I have some Christian friends who do not celebrate Christmas. They object to the many pagan traditions that have crept into the holiday and argue that Jesus was not even born on December 25. I don’t disagree. They are quite correct.

But the reason for the season is not Rudolf the red-nosed reindeer, Santa Claus, Frosty the snowman, or roasting chestnuts on an open fire. December 25 is the date Christians have set apart to commemorate the Incarnation, a doctrine clearly taught in the New Testament: “And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifested in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen by angels, preached among the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up in glory” (1 Tim. 3:16, emphasis added).

My Jewish friends struggle with the doctrine of the Incarnation. To them the concept of God becoming flesh seems to contradict their understanding of God. But the Incarnation is not unique to the New Testament. The Old Testament prophets looked forward to God becoming man: “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to Me the One to be Ruler in Israel, whose goings forth are from of old, from everlasting” (Mic. 5:2, emphasis added).

This prophecy spoke of a future ruler who would be born in Bethlehem. Although He would be born, as we all are, this Baby was different: He was “from everlasting.” The Hebrew word translated “everlasting” is olam, which means “vanishing point” or “eternity.” Moses identified the everlasting one as God: “Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever You had formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting [olam] to everlasting [olam], You are God” (Ps. 90:2).

The rabbis of Jesus’ time understood that Micah 5:2 referred to the Messiah:

*And when he [Herod] had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he inquired of them where the Christ [Messiah] was to be born. So they said to him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it is written by the prophet: ‘But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are not the least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you shall come a Ruler who will shepherd My people Israel’” (Mt. 2:4–6).*

Through the prophet Isaiah, the Lord revealed the Messiah would be born of a virgin and would be called Immanuel. “Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive, and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel” (Isa. 7:14).

Most rabbis, as well as many liberal Christians, argue that the Hebrew word almah (which is translated as “virgin”) actually means young woman. However, when the Jewish people translated the Old Testament into the Greek Septuagint in the mid-3rd and 2nd centuries BC, they translated almah as parthenos, a Greek word that unequivocally means virgin.

Looking at Isaiah 7:14, translating the word almah as young woman does not make sense. When Isaiah gave the prophecy, the Lord had just told King Ahaz of Judah to ask for a sign to confirm God’s promise that Judah would not be destroyed by the armies of Syria and Israel: “Moreover the Lord spoke again to Ahaz, saying, ‘Ask a sign for yourself from the Lord your God; ask it either in the depth or in the height above’” (vv. 10–11).

In a display of false piety, King Ahaz replied, “I will not ask, nor will I test the Lord!” (v. 12). Having rejected the Lord’s offer for a sign, Isaiah turned from King Ahaz to the house of David to announce the Lord’s sign:

*Hear now, O house of David! Is it a small thing for you to weary men, but will you weary my God also? Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel* (vv. 13–14).

A natural conception would not grab the house of David’s attention. The world has seen billions of young women conceive and bear sons. But a virgin having a child—now that would be a sign that should get the children of Israel’s attention. That miracle would be fulfilled by the conception and birth of Jesus:

*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” (Mt. 1:18–21).*

The name Immanuel signified the Messiah’s divinity:

*So all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying: “Behold, the virgin shall...*
be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,” which is translated, “God with us” (vv. 22–23).

The Incarnation was also prophesied in 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.

The Messiah’s humanity is described in the phrases a Child is born and a Son is given. His divinity is expressed in His names Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, and Everlasting Father; and His eternal authority is seen in the phrase of the increase of His government there will be no end.

Christmas a pagan holiday? It can be if we let it be. But when I sit in a coffee shop at the mall at Christmastime, I can’t help noticing Christmas carols playing in the background. Every year, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation broadcasts Handel’s Messiah. Both sides of our family are at best nominal Christians. Yet every year they ask me to read the Christmas story as we gather together to celebrate Christmas.

My Muslim and Jewish friends make it a point to wish me a hearty “Merry Christmas!” It is the one time of the year where it seems politically correct to publicly proclaim the Good News—that the Messiah was manifested in the flesh. He and He alone is the reason we celebrate Christmas, as we thank God for the Incarnation.

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THE BEREAAN BOX

WHAT IS THE UNPARDONABLE SIN?

“Therefore I [Jesus] say to you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven men. Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man, it will be forgiven him; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven him, either in this age or in the age to come” (Mt. 12:31–32; cf. Mk. 3:22–30).

According to Jesus, the unpardonable sin is “blasphemy against the [Holy] Spirit” (Mt. 12:31). However, it is important to study the context of Matthew 12:22–32 to understand what this means.

Jesus had just healed a blind, mute, demon-possessed man who then immediately spoke and saw (v. 22). The multitudes were amazed and asked with some skepticism, “Could this be the Son of David?” (v. 23). In other words, is Jesus the promised Messiah who has come to rule over Israel?

The Pharisees, however, declared, “This fellow does not cast out demons except by Beelzebub, the ruler of the demons” (v. 24). They admitted Jesus performed a miracle; but they accused Him of being demon-possessed and performing the miracle through Satan. Therefore, they were proclaiming that Jesus was not the Messiah.

Jesus countered their accusation by telling them the following:

1. Satan would never cast out demons because it would destroy his kingdom (v. 26).
2. If Satan empowered exorcisms, then the Jewish exorcists, whom the Pharisees believed cast out demons using divine power, also cast out demons using demonic power. Therefore, their logic actually condemned their own exorcists as well (v. 27).
3. If Jesus cast out demons by the Holy Spirit, which He did, then Jesus was destroying Satan’s kingdom and had come to institute God’s Kingdom in Israel through the Holy Spirit (v. 28).
4. Casting out demons for a good purpose (to heal a man and deliver him from demon possession) proved Jesus’ miracle-working power was from God, not Satan.

To attribute the Holy Spirit’s power to Satan was unforgivable blasphemy. The unpardonable sin was attributing to Satan the righteous work of the Holy Spirit of God in healing the demon-possessed man through Jesus (v. 32).

This sin was unique and exclusive to this particular situation. The unpardonable sin cannot be committed today because Jesus is not physically on Earth performing miracles through the Holy Spirit of God.

BY DAVID M. LEVY
OUR WONDERFUL GOD OF CHRISTMAS
WHAT IS GOD LIKE?
HERE’S A LOOK AT WHAT GOD TEACHES US ABOUT HIMSELF THROUGH THE ACCOUNT OF ZACHARIAS AND ELIZABETH.

BY MARK JOHNSON

For more than 50 years, Charles M. Schulz’s animated classic, A Charlie Brown Christmas, has touched millions of television viewers. In it, Charlie complains, “I think there must be something wrong with me, Linus. Christmas is coming, but I’m not happy. I don’t feel the way I’m supposed to feel.”

Many people can relate to Charlie Brown’s dilemma. The Christmas season leaves them empty instead of nostalgic, overwhelmed instead of joyful, or bored instead of excited. Schulz’s cartoon bemoans the hollowness of commercialism and, instead, takes viewers to the Christ Child in the manger, with Linus reciting the full Christmas account from Luke 2.

Christmas is not about elves, the North Pole, chubby cherubs, or roasting chestnuts. Christmas is about God who sweeps real people up into His amazing plan.

The Bible is full of people whom God touched, and the Christmas record is no exception. Mary, Joseph, the wise men, and the shepherds were real, normal, and flawed human beings—like you and me. They are not the heroes of Christmas. God is. He is the One who revealed Himself through Christmas, used ordinary people to do so, and transformed them in the process. So what is He like?
GOD IS POWERFUL

Consider Zacharias and Elizabeth. Before writing the familiar words telling us of Jesus’ birth in Luke 2, historian and Gospel-writer Luke focused on an aging couple God chose to use in a special way. Before learning of the Baby in the manger, we learn about the unlikely parents of John, the Messiah’s forerunner.

Zacharias (meaning “Yahweh remembers”) and Elizabeth (meaning “promise of God”), both from priestly Jewish families, were “well advanced in years” and had long grappled with the pain of infertility because “Elizabeth was barren” (Lk. 1:7). The disappointment of having no heir was compounded by the stigma of a culture that considered childlessness a judgment of God. Luke, however, made it clear God had not punished them: “They were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments . . . blameless” (v. 6).

Zacharias was one of thousands of priests living near Jerusalem in the Judean hill country. His division of Abijah served in rotation two weeks a year. Because of the number of priests, burning incense in the Temple’s Holy Place was limited to once in a lifetime. After years of waiting, the day came when the lot fell to Zacharias. He found himself lifting Israel’s petitions as the fragrant incense wafted up from the incense altar and the crowds outside lifted their own morning or evening prayers.

Suddenly, he was terrorized by the glow of a brilliant angel to his right, between the altar of incense and the holy candelabra. God’s messenger told him not to fear but that his wife would bear him a son. This boy would be the Messiah’s forerunner who, as prophesied in Malachi 4:5–6, would “go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah ‘to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children,’ and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (Lk. 1:17).

After years of childless disappointment, having a child seemed unlikely to the old priest, who protested, “How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is well advanced in years” (v. 18).

Never argue with an angel of God! “I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and was sent to speak to you and bring you these glad tidings. But behold, you will be mute . . . until the day these things take place, because you did not believe my words” (vv. 19–20).

Perhaps Zacharias needed to have been more like Mary. When the same angel told her she would be the virgin mother of the Messiah, she questioned the means, not the fact, and was told, “With God nothing will be impossible” (v. 37). The God of Christmas is all-powerful. Zacharias would be mute for nine months to ponder that fact.

Do you feel weak? The God who miraculously healed Elizabeth’s barrenness and sent His Son by virgin birth has all the strength you need. No prayer is too big for Him to answer, no problem too hard for Him to solve, and no person too lost for Him to save.

GOD IS TRUSTWORTHY

Christmas also assures us God keeps His promises. Elizabeth became pregnant, just as the angel said. Scripture records her gratitude: “Thus the Lord has dealt with me, in the days when He looked on me, to take away my reproach among people” (v. 25).

Scripture also records Mary’s visit to Elizabeth and Elizabeth’s encouragement to her young relative after Elizabeth’s child leaped inside her in the presence of the unborn Messiah: “Blessed is she who believed, for there will be a fulfillment of those things which were told her from the Lord” (v. 45).

When Elizabeth’s son was born, God got the credit, as “her neighbors and relatives heard how the Lord had shown great mercy to her” (v. 58). When others tried to name the baby Zacharias after his father, she spoke up in obedience to the angel’s words: “No; he shall be called John” (v. 60). John means “God’s grace.”

God had proven Himself trustworthy, and she honored His instructions. When people motioned to Zacharias to determine his
wishes, he wrote, “His name is John” (v. 63). “Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, praising God” (v. 64).

Just as God was keeping centuries of promises in sending His Son to Earth, He also fulfilled His personal word to the individuals He selected to use in unfolding His plan. Life is difficult; and just like Paul Bunyan’s character in The Pilgrim’s Progress, we sometimes find ourselves prisoners of “the giant despair.” What delivered the pilgrim from depression was “promise.” It reminds us to hold fast to specific biblical assurances and count on God, whom we can trust in our own circumstances.

**GOD SAVES**

Filled with the Holy Spirit, Zacharias prophesied. His inspired hymn in verses 68–79 is full of Old Testament references and focuses on God’s plan of salvation through His tender mercy. For example, “And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Highest; for you will go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways, to give knowledge of salvation to His people by the remission of their sins, through the tender mercy of our God” (vv. 76–78).

God would certainly fulfill His covenants with Israel; and He had used Zacharias and Elizabeth in His unfolding plan. Their son John—a Levite, later called John the Baptist—would introduce the Savior to the nation.

Forgiveness of sin is our greatest need. We have offended the holy Judge of the universe and deserve His punishment; but Christmas shows us that He is a saving God to all who trust His Son. The angel instructed Joseph, “Call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins” (Mt. 1:21). Come to Him and be saved forever.

Christmas is about God. It reveals His absolute power, total trustworthiness, and saving strength. Zacharias and Elizabeth were transformed by joining God in His unfolding plan. When our Christmases and our lives focus on Him, we become filled with confidence, peace, and joy.

Charlie Brown’s friend Linus always carried a security blanket. But he dropped it once. As someone pointed out in A Charlie Brown Christmas, he let go of his blanket at the very moment when, part way through Luke 2, he recited, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy. . . . For unto you is born this day in the City of David, a Savior, which is Christ the Lord [KJV].”

Knowing the God of Christmas changes us. We no longer have to fear or clutch our earthly securities. Let this God and Savior transform you this Christmas.

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**ENDNOTES**


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He was brilliant but brutal: King Herod the Great

by Peter Colón

KING HEROD was a complex man. He was a brilliant builder and politician, yet a ruthless and brutal tyrant. He makes a brief appearance in Scripture as the cold-blooded killer of baby boys in Bethlehem and surrounding areas in an attempt to kill Jesus. But outside the Bible narrative, who was he?

An Edomite. Herod’s father was an Idumean, and his mother was a Nabataean Arab. The Idumeans descended from Jacob’s twin brother Esau, who was the “father of the Edomites” (Gen. 36:9).

The Edomites were perpetual enemies of Israel (Amos 1:11). To describe the relationship, the Hebrew language uses the expression *olam ebah*, which means “everlasting hatred” (cf. Ezek. 35:5).

God promised to judge Edom for its evil behavior toward Israel: “As you rejoiced because the inheritance of the house of Israel was desolate, so I will do to you; you shall be desolate, O Mount Seir, as well as all of Edom—all of it! Then they shall know that I am the Lord” (Amos 1:15).

A shallow Jew. John Hyrcanus (c. 175–104 BC), a descendant of the famed Maccabee family, established the Hasmonean Dynasty of ancient Judea. During his military campaigns, he pushed a policy of forced conversion to the Jewish faith on all non-Jewish people throughout Judea.

The ancient Jewish historian Flavius Josephus reported,

Hyrcanus took also Dora and Marissa, cities of Idumea, and subdued all the Idumeans; and permitted them to stay in that country, if they would circumcise their genitals, and make use of the laws of the Jews; and they were so desirous of living in the country of their forefathers, that they submitted to the use of circumcision, and of the rest of the Jewish ways of living; at which time therefore this befell them, that they were hereafter no other than Jews.¹

This forced conversion affected Herod, who was considered a half-Jew: He was culturally and religiously Jewish but not by blood or direct ancestry. To gain legitimacy among his Jewish subjects, Herod married a Jewish princess. But the Jewish people under his reign always questioned his religious commitment.

A fanatical Hellenist. Herod fanatically sought to integrate Greek culture (Hellenism) into Judea and persecuted those who opposed his policies. In Jerusalem, he constructed a large open-air theater for pagan dramas that showcased sadistic spectacles.
He also built a hippodrome for horse and chariot races. His Hellenistic influence was especially evident in the Greco-Roman redesign of the Jerusalem Temple.

But Hellenistic culture and customs were contrary to the Jewish faith, betraying Herod’s indifference toward biblical commands. Psalm 1:1 says, “Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor sits in the path of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful.”

A pawn of Rome. Herod’s relationship with Rome began with his father, Antipater, who was made a Roman citizen by Julius Caesar. Herod and his family were credited with the same status of citizenship.

Herod became a skilled political schemer, and the Roman Senate eventually appointed him king of Judea. As Rome’s client king, Herod constantly struggled to maintain a delicate balance between appeasing his Roman masters and satisfying the sensitivities of his conquered Jewish subjects.

A sly fox. Herod also was a cunning administrator. He successfully kept the peace between Jerusalem and Rome, and he capitalized on Judea’s agricultural industry. Products like olive oil, dates, and grapes contributed to the economic prosperity of the region, the most productive land in the Middle East.

He extended Israel’s territory and energized commerce and trade, as seen in his construction of the brilliant seaport city of Caesarea Maritime. He used the huge profits from trade and crushing taxes to undertake a series of massive building projects.

Although Herod the Great had a great vision for Israel and the regime, his vision was clouded by self-aggrandizement and arrogance.

A merciless tiger. Unfortunately, Herod was a paranoid tyrant whose hands were stained with the blood of many victims. In his warped mind, he suspected everyone was plotting to kill or dethrone him—even his own family.

Convinced through a series of lies that his favorite wife, Mariamne the Hasmonean, was unfaithful and plotting to poison him, he reluctantly ordered her execution. He even charged his two sons by Mariamne with treason and ordered them to be strangled to death.

When the magi arrived and told Herod about Jesus’ birth, referring to the Child as “King of the Jews,” Herod’s paranoia soared. He considered himself the king of the Jews, as appointed by Rome. So he immediately tried to kill his potential rival by ordering the murder of all boys two years old and younger in the region (Mt. 2:16–18).

Skeptics question whether this biblical event really happened; but considering Herod’s intoxication with power, even the greatest skeptic should realize the slaughter is consistent with Herod’s pathological disposition.

It seems perverse this pseudo Jew, who scrupulously observed such Mosaic dietary laws as not eating pork, completely disregarded the sanctity of human life. Clearly, he had no regard for God’s law, which states, “You shall not murder” (Ex. 20:13). His penchant for murdering even members of his own family was well-known. Hearing that Herod killed his own son, Emperor Augustus famously taunted, “I’d rather be Herod’s pig than his son.”

A despot while dying. Isaiah 57:21 says, “‘There is no peace,’ says my God, ‘for the wicked.’” Herod certainly experienced no peace at the time of his death. Josephus described the agonizing end of Herod’s life in his book Antiquities of the Jews:

But now Herod’s distemper greatly increased upon him after a severe manner, and this by God’s judgment upon him for his sins; for a fire glowed in him slowly, which did not so much appear to the touch outwardly, as it augmented his pains inwardly; for it brought upon him a vehement appetite to eating, which he could not avoid to supply with one sort of food or other. His entrails were also exacerated, and the chief violence of his pain lay on his large intestine; an aqueous and transparent liquor also had settled itself about his feet, and a like matter afflicted him at the bottom of his belly. Nay, further, his privy-member was putrefied, and produced worms; and when he sat upright, he had a difficulty of breathing, which was very loathsome, on account of the stench of his breath, and the quickness of its returns; he had also convulsions in all parts of his body.¹

Yet even amid his intense pain as he lay dying, his barbarity did not cease. Fearing people would rejoice after he died, he ordered that all Jewish leaders be detained in the hippodrome and killed upon his death so that there would be great mourning throughout the land. However, immediately before his death, all the leaders were set free.

Herod died in Jericho and was entombed at his fortified palace, called Herodium, about five miles south of Bethlehem. He prearranged that on his death, a diadem and a crown of gold be placed on his head and a scepter placed in his right hand. How ironic that King Herod was buried in splendor near where the true Jewish king, Jesus the Messiah, was born in humble settings (Mt. 2:1; Lk. 1:30–33).

So who was this man named Herod the Great? He was a Roman client, a “Jewish” king, a Hellenistic ruler, an Edomite by birth, a Jew by marriage, a Greek in culture, and a Roman out of necessity. He governed like a fox, ruled like a tiger, and died like a dog. *

ENDNOTES

1 Josephus Antiquities of the Jews 13.9
2 Ibid. 17.6.5

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We all need encouragement from time to time. So did Mary and Joseph, whom God strengthened in an extraordinary way.

BY RICHARD D. EMMONS
Who were those people? What just happened?

Mary and Joseph may have asked themselves these questions following their brief encounter with Simeon and Anna at the Temple in Jerusalem. They had gone there to perform their obligations before God following the birth of their son, Jesus; and God used the occasion to have two elderly saints encourage them in their walk with Him and to remind them that Jesus was no ordinary child.

Though Mary and Joseph both knew the baby was conceived when the Holy Spirit came upon Mary and that the child would be called the “Son of God” (Lk. 1:35), they probably could not fully comprehend the significance of what was happening and needed comfort and reassurance.

Forced to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem in the final days of Mary’s pregnancy because of a government census, they could not even stay in a kataluma (Greek for “guest room”; 22:11) because there was no room. So they stayed in a stable, where Mary gave birth.

First God sent the shepherds to them. They appeared announcing that angels had sent them to find “a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (2:11).

Then He brought Simeon and Anna. Nearly seven weeks had passed, and Mary and Joseph had settled in a house in Bethlehem (Mt. 2:11); circumcised their son on the eighth day, in accordance with the Mosaic Law (Lev. 12:3); and named Him Jesus, as God had instructed them through the angel Gabriel.

They waited the additional 33 days (v. 4) before going to the Temple to fulfill the Law’s requirements to redeem their firstborn and offer a sacrifice of two turtledoves for Mary’s cleansing (v. 8). Again, God surprised them with comfort and encouragement.

Directed by God’s Spirit, the aged Simeon walked up to them and gently took the 6-week-old baby from their arms. Without explanation, he began blessing God for the infant face of all peoples, a light to bring revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel” (Lk. 2:29–32).

Simeon knew exactly who the baby was. He was the Messiah of Israel. He affirmed what the angel Gabriel had already told Mary:

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 (1:31–33).

And an angel had told Joseph,

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 (Mt. 1:20–21).

God encouraged this young couple by confirming both His message and the child’s identity by sending Simeon and Anna—choice servants He had prepared to meet them at the Temple. Simeon is described as a just and devout resident of Jerusalem.1 He wasn’t a priest or anyone special. But he was a servant of God, living in anticipation of God’s redemption of Israel. He lived in a daily relationship with God’s Holy Spirit, and his pursuit of God had secured a message from the Spirit that he would see God’s Messiah before he died. It seems Simeon had shared this promise with others in the godly remnant of believers, like Anna, who walked up “in that instant” (Lk. 2:28) and joined the celebration.

How did Simeon know when, where, and for whom to look? Perhaps he knew that, 18 months earlier, the priest Zacharias was in the Temple when he saw an angel who told him he and his elderly wife, Elizabeth, would have a child they would name John who would “go before Him [the Messiah] in the spirit and power of Elijah . . . to make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (1:17).

Perhaps Simeon was even at the Temple six months earlier when Zacharias and Elizabeth brought John (later called John the Baptist) to complete the same requirements Mary and Joseph were completing. Might Simeon have come every day looking for the Promised One? Clearly, he was directed by the Holy Spirit (2:27), but these events may have heightened his sensitivity.

His appearance seems intended to encourage these humble parents in their mission to raise this special child.

Simeon then proceeded to warn Mary about her child’s destiny: “Behold, this Child is destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign which will be spoken against (yes, a sword will pierce through your own soul also), that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed” (vv. 34–35).

The road here on Earth would not be easy for Jesus or Mary.
Jesus would divide the nation. Many would fall as a result of rejecting Him. His ministry would reveal the true nature of people’s hearts, and Mary would suffer as she watched her son suffer. Simeon’s prophecy gave Mary a fresh understanding that fulfilling God’s plan in this world often brings suffering.

Simeon’s message was like a double-edged sword for Mary and Joseph. On the one hand, they must have been encouraged by his recognition of Jesus as the Lord’s Messiah. On the other hand, Mary knew she would experience soul-rending heartache through her son’s suffering. (It appears Joseph died before Jesus was crucified.)

But Anna’s appearance drew them all back to encouragement. “And coming in that instant” (v. 38), as Mary was facing the distress of Simeon’s prophecy, Anna broke into thanksgiving. This dear Jewish saint, who was around 84 years old and was widowed “seven years from her virginity” (vv. 36–37), had been in the Temple, fasting and praying “night and day” (v. 37). She encouraged and rejoiced with Joseph and Mary in God’s blessings.

Luke described Anna as one focused on the positives, seeking to glorify God through her faithful ministry. She had chosen to invest her life in fastings and prayers; and after she saw the infant Jesus, she “spoke of Him to all those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem” (v. 38).

Anna was a prophetess, prepared through many years of focusing on the Kingdom of God, rather than on her personal losses, which probably made her uniquely suited to encourage God’s chosen couple on their difficult path. So God used two senior saints to affirm and encourage younger folks seeking to obey Him in the midst of trying circumstances. Isn’t that the way it should be today, as well?

It likely would be months before the magi arrived—whose presence also probably encouraged the couple. Meanwhile, Joseph and Mary lived routine lives, resting in the joy of God’s public affirmation of their son and His work.

ENDNOTE

1 One might speculate how Luke learned about this incident. He interviewed “eyewitnesses and ministers of the word” (Lk. 1:2). But surely Simeon, Anna, and Joseph were with the Lord by then, about 60 years later. Mary may still have been alive (possibly in her 70s). It’s hardly likely this incident was recorded in any official capacity. Clearly, the encounter with Simeon and Anna had made a huge impact on Mary. It seems likely she would have shared the story many times with her other children, especially after they became believers.

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THE MEN FROM THE EAST
THEY STUDIED ASTRONOMY, ASTROLOGY, PHILOSOPHY, RELIGION, AND SORCERY, AMONG OTHER THINGS. YET THEY TRAVELED ALMOST 1,000 MILES TO WORSHIP THE NEWBORN KING OF THE JEWS.

WHO WERE THE MAGI?
AND WHAT WAS THE STAR THEY FOLLOWED?

BY DAVID M. LEVY

The story of the wise men, or magi, is one of the most interesting and captivating accounts recorded in the Bible. Countless Christmas cards, carols, and plays present the story of their journey to see Jesus, the one “born King of the Jews” (Mt. 2:2). But often such narratives fail to accurately represent the biblical account.

The Bible never provides the number of wise men or identifies them as kings or says they came from the Orient or states they visited Jesus while he was a baby in a stable, surrounded by shepherds, sheep, and camels.

So what does Scripture reveal about the magi and their journey to see the Christ Child? It reveals quite a bit, actually.

WHO WERE THE MAGI?

The Bible first mentions the magi in Matthew 2:1–2: “Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came
to Jerusalem, saying, ‘Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him.’"

Of the four gospels, only Matthew records the magi account. This fact makes sense since the they were seeking the one “born King of the Jews” (v. 2; cf. 21:4–5; 27:11, 29, 37), and Matthew was writing to the Jewish people.

The phrase wise men comes from the Greek word magoi, which is “magi” in English. The magi lived in the seventh century BC in the Median Empire, which eventually became part of the Persian Empire. The magi later spread into Babylonia, Arabia, and other countries.

They were priests who dressed in all white, offered sacrifices, developed occult powers, and used divining rods for various purposes. They studied and practiced astronomy, astrology, philosophy, religion steeped in superstition, sorcery (cf. Acts 13:6, 8), soothsaying, conjuring, and dream interpretation—a practice mentioned in the book of Daniel during the time of the Babylonian Empire (Dan. 1:20; 2:2; 4:7; 5:7). As astronomers who practiced astrology, they believed the stars and planets influenced human life.

This marvelous story of the magi reveals how God worked to announce the Messiah’s birth to the Gentile world and presents a wonderful illustration of men from an ungodly culture desiring to know and worship the one true God.

God stirred the magi’s hearts to seek and find the King of the Jews, just as He called Abraham to leave his home country of Ur and go to a land He promised to show him. God promises that anyone who earnestly seeks Him will find Him (Jer. 29:13; Mt. 7:7).

THE MAGI’S JOURNEY AND ARRIVAL

The magi came “from the East” to Jerusalem (Mt. 2:1). The journey (900 to 1,000 miles) probably took many weeks. Scholars believe more than three magi made the trip and that, for most of the trip, they probably didn’t ride on camels, which were considered animals of burden.

Their journey raises a number of questions: How did these men know to ask, “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews?” (v. 2). Why would they make a long, hazardous trip to worship a baby? What made them think Jesus was in Jerusalem? And what was the makeup of the star they saw in the East?

The magi may have heard about a king of the Jews from the Jewish people who remained in Babylon after Israel’s release from captivity, and they may have read of the prophetic expectation of Israel’s coming King: “A Star shall come out of Jacob; a Scepter shall rise out of Israel” (Num. 24:17).

The word scepter speaks of kingship. Magi believed an extremely bright star indicated the birth of a king, so the special star probably alerted them to the Jewish prophecy. They had access to the book of Daniel and other prophetic Scriptures that described the Messiah’s appearance (Dan. 9:24–27), place of birth (Mic. 5:1–2), and kingly rule (Isa. 9:7).

The prompting of the Holy Spirit and the realization that a king of Jesus’ magnitude and greatness had been born probably motivated the magi to make the long trip. They knew to head toward Jerusalem because of the star’s leading.

THE STAR

We know the following details concerning the Star of Bethlehem:

1. It appeared and disappeared.
2. The magi called it “His star,” indicating its connection to Jesus (Mt. 2:2).
3. It appeared in the East then moved west toward Israel.
4. It appeared twice.
5. It led the wise men to a specific house in Bethlehem (v. 9).
6. It most likely appeared to them the night Jesus was born.

Commentators have speculated the star might have been a nova, supernova, comet, or an alignment of planets.

In 1603, astronomer Johannes Kepler reported seeing an unusual conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in Pisces and, through extensive studies, found that the same conjunction of planets was seen around 6 BC, approximately the time of Jesus’ birth.

But biblical scholars do not believe these natural explanations adequately explain the scriptural data. Scripture suggests the Star of Bethlehem was not a natural stellar phenomenon but, rather, a special star created by God for the unique purpose of guiding the wise men to Jesus.

If the Star of Bethlehem had been a mere natural star, the magnitude of it would have destroyed life on Earth. Its intense brightness radiated the brilliance of God’s glory, often called the Shekinah Glory of God. Such was the case when an angel announced Christ’s birth to shepherds, and “the glory of the Lord shone around them” (Lk. 2:9).

In addition, stars naturally move from east to west due to the earth’s rotation. But Scripture says the Star of Bethlehem moved from Jerusalem to Bethlehem—north to south. Scripture also says the star “went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was” (Mt. 2:9). Natural stars never stop moving, nor do they lead people to a particular location.

HEROD’S WICKED PLOT

After the magi reported to King Herod why they had come to Jerusalem, Scripture says Herod “was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him” (v. 3).

The word troubled means Herod was shaken to his very core. Herod the Great was paranoid and suspicious, mistrusting everyone around him, especially when it came to his position as king. His insecurity led him to murder three of his sons, his wife Mariamne, and 300 of his officers. The citizens of Jerusalem feared his brutality.

Herod feared losing his crown since he was not born Jewish nor was he a
Herod was an Idumaean (Edomite), appointed by Roman General Mark Antony to become tetrarch of Galilee in 37 BC. Later the Roman Empire appointed Herod king over Judea, and he became known as Herod the Great for his massive building projects, including the splendid Temple in Jerusalem named after him. The magi’s inquiry fed Herod’s paranoia of a competing king, so he took immediate action:

And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. So they said to him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it is written by the prophet: ‘But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are not the least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you shall come a Ruler who will shepherd My people Israel’” (vv. 4–6; cf. Mic. 5:2).

The Jewish leaders—the Sanhedrin, high priests, scribes, and elders—knew the Micah 5:2 prophecy and told Herod where the Messiah would be born. Notice, these spiritual leaders of Israel knew the prophecies about the Messiah’s birth but made no attempt to travel five miles from Jerusalem to Bethlehem to see whether the “King of the Jews” had been born. Amazing!

Aware of the prophecy, Herod wasted no time. He “secretly called the wise men, [to learn] from them what time the star appeared” (Mt. 2:7). Then—in a cunning, deceptive, and diabolical move—he sent the wise men to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search carefully for the young Child, and when you have found Him, bring back word to me, that I may come and worship Him also” (v. 8). Herod had no intention of worshiping Jesus; he wanted to murder Him—and probably His family too.

Immediately after the magi departed for Bethlehem, “the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy” (vv. 9–10).

The magi were amazed and overjoyed to see the star appear to guide them again, not only to Bethlehem but also to the exact house where Jesus dwelt. Though their entire trip—from the East to Bethlehem—probably took several months, the final destination was worth it.

**THE MAGI’S ADORATION**

Matthew wrote, “And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh” (v. 11).

This passage makes it clear Jesus’ family was no longer dwelling in a stable or cave but in a house. As the magi entered, they immediately fell on their faces and worshiped the Baby. They gave themselves to Him before presenting their gifts.

After adoring Him, they opened their treasures and gave Jesus gifts specifically fit for a king of that day. In Scripture, gold symbolizes God’s deity, glory, and majesty; frankincense symbolizes the fragrance of Jesus’ life; and myrrh symbolizes Christ’s sacrifice, death, and burial.

Before the magi left, God warned them in a dream not to return to Herod: So they “departed for their own country another way” (v. 12).

Soon afterward, God also warned Joseph in a dream to flee Bethlehem: “Now when they [the magi] had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, ‘Arise, take the young Child and His mother, flee to Egypt . . . for Herod will seek the young Child to destroy Him’” (v. 13). Joseph obeyed and fled with his family that night.

We can learn many lessons from the story of the magi. First, God included the most unlikely Gentiles in revealing the birth of His Son to the world, reminding us God is no respecter of persons and desires all people to come to the knowledge of the truth (cf. Acts 10:34; 1 Tim. 2:4). Second, God guided the wise men to Bethlehem in a miraculous way, which teaches us of God’s power. And third, God orchestrated every aspect of the affairs of man to accomplish His will, reminding us of His sovereignty.

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HOW DO WE KNOW THE EXODUS HAPPENED?

“The actual evidence concerning the Exodus resembles the evidence for the unicorn,” declared Pennsylvania State University Jewish Studies Professor Baruch Halpern.¹ The ancient Israelites created “a historical saga so powerful that it led biblical historians and archaeologists alike to recreate its mythical past—from stones and potsherds,” said Israeli scholar and archaeologist Israel Finkelstein.²

In other words, according to them, the Exodus never happened. Critical scholars like Halpern and Finkelstein view the Israelites’ Exodus from Egypt as mere storytelling, but with a moral message.

Such thinking leads to films like Ridley Scott’s Exodus: Gods and Kings, which radically depart from the Bible and remove any trace of a moral message. For this reason, Christian Bale, the actor who portrayed Moses in the film, said Moses was “likely schizophrenic and one of the most barbaric characters I ever read about in my life.”³

Critics of the Exodus claim Egypt left no direct evidence of the event. But Egyptologist Dr. Mansour Boraik has observed that if the Exodus happened, the Egyptians would not have recorded it because to do so would have been to admit defeat.⁴

The exact opposite is true of the Bible. The Bible depicts the Hebrews as unworthy of deliverance, disloyal, and disobedient even after the Exodus. In fact, the Old Testament often depicts Israel as having departed from God and the patriarchs of the faith as tarnished individuals. These facts underscore the text’s realism. What writers seeking to create a grand saga of their origins would paint such unvarnished, unflattering images of themselves?

The facts supporting the biblical account weigh in favor of historicity. First, there is the 3,500-year-old Passover tradition, which originated in Egypt at the time of the Exodus. If the Exodus never happened, how did Passover begin and become so central to Judaism? Egyptologist and archaeologist Donald B. Redford admitted, “Despite the lateness and unreliability of the story in Exodus, no one can deny that the tradition of Israel’s coming out of Egypt was one of long standing.”⁵

Second, the Bible includes details that correspond with Egyptian archaeology of the period: the practice of midwives using delivery stools; brickmaking;⁶ the use of Egyptian loan-words, such as Moses (cf. Ex. 2:10); the uniform use of the term pharaoh during the Egyptian New Kingdom (the 18th Dynasty of Egypt, ca. 1550–1292 BC); the harsh treatment of foreign, Semitic slaves and their use in building projects; and the importance of magic to the Egyptians (cf. 7:9–10).

Egyptian wall paintings and ancient documents also reveal taskmasters beat their slaves before questioning, as the taskmasters did to the Israelites.⁷ The Egyptian Tale of Sinuhe and the Annals of Thutmose III describe Canaan as a “land flowing with milk and honey,” as does the Bible. And ancient Egyptian accounts, such as the Ipuwer Papyrus (13th century BC), speak of plagues similar to the 10 plagues in the Bible.

Third, the Bible records geographical details that align with the Egyptian records. Archaeologists have discovered such places as Avaris (Tell ed-Dab’a), where a large group of Semitic people lived who seemingly disappeared overnight. They also have discovered Ramesses (Pi-Ramesse), Migdol (Tell Defari), Succoth (Tell Masuta), and the Balah and Timsah Lakes (Yam Suph)—all places the Bible mentions in relation to the Exodus (Ex. 1:11; 12:37; 14:1–2). Such geographical and historical details could not have been invented almost a thousand years later.

Other archaeological witnesses include the Merneptah Stele and the Berlin Pedestal Relief, both Egyptian records that attest to the fact the Hebrews became a powerful nation shortly after the Exodus; ancient Near Eastern law codes that parallel the Ten Commandments and Mosaic Law (Ur-Nammu Code, ca. 2000 BC; Laws of Eshunna, ca. 1900 BC; Lipit Ishtar Code, ca. 1870 BC; Code of Hammurabi, ca. 1700 BC; and Hittite Laws ca. 1500 BC); and, according to archaeological researcher Brad C. Sparks, 90 parallels in ancient Egyptian literature to the Exodus story.

Conservative Egyptologists continue to find new support for the biblical account. Thus we have good reasons to believe the Exodus happened.

ENDNOTES

6. Brick-making appears to have been a labor specialization that was normative for slaves in ancient Egypt. The Tomb of Rekhmire from the Eighteenth Dynasty of Egypt (TT100) shows Levantine Asiatic and Nubian slaves making bricks. The Israelites were primarily, if not exclusively, brickmakers as opposed to builders (cf. Ex. 5:14–15, 17).
7. In Exodus 5:14, the Israelite supervisors were beaten first then questioned, the same interrogation technique used during the tomb robbery incidents under Ramesses IX.

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Paul’s concluding words in this epistle are extremely important. He revisited prominent themes of prayer, sanctification, the Lord’s faithfulness, spiritual commitment, and preparedness for the Rapture of the church. He concluded the letter as it began: requesting that the Lord’s grace and peace be with the Thessalonian church and impressing on the Thessalonians the importance of relying on the Lord’s help and presence through prayer.

ASSISTING THE THESSALONIANS

Paul began his benediction by praying for the Thessalonians’ sanctification: “Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Th. 5:23).

The only way the Thessalonians would be able to follow Paul’s exhortations given in the previous section (vv. 12–22) would be by yielding to God’s sanctifying work in their lives. Thus Paul prayed that God would sanctify them “completely” in every area so that they would be made holy. This is the goal for each believer in every age.

Holy living begins with sanctification. The word sanctification means to be set apart, both spiritually (1 Cor. 1:1; 6:11) and physically for Christ. The process takes place through the Holy Spirit, who cleanses believers by washing them with the water of God’s Word (Eph. 5:26).

Scripture mentions three stages of sanctification:

1. Positional. As believers, we are positionally sanctified—eternally set apart unto God at the time of our redemption through receiving Jesus Christ as our personal Savior (Heb. 10:10, 14; 13:12).

2. Progressive. We also are progressively being sanctified. This is a daily, ongoing process as we live out the teachings of God’s Word.

3. Perfected. We also will be perfected in sanctification. We will receive ultimate, or complete, sanctification when we receive our resurrected bodies when the Lord comes for His church (Eph. 5:27). Then every believer will be completely sanctified.

Paul described what it means to be sanctified in one’s whole being, that is, “your whole spirit, soul, and body” (1 Th. 5:23). He taught that no part of us is left out of the sanctifying process. Every part of a believer—spirit, soul, and body—will be chipped away, shaped, and polished to make us complete and prepared for the Lord’s coming. The word your speaks specifically to the Thessalonians’ need to be sanctified and kept by God’s power. This need holds true for Christians in every generation.

Paul mentioned several areas of our being that need sanctification. First is our “spirit.” (The words soul and spirit are used interchangeably in both Testaments, making it difficult to differentiate between the terms.) Scripture says God breathed into man’s nostrils the “breath of life; and man became a living being [soul]” (Gen. 2:7). This breath of life gives people the ability to communicate with God. When Adam sinned against God, spiritual death ensued, separating mankind from God (cf. chap. 3). When we are born again, we receive a new spiritual nature through receiving Jesus Christ. Thus direct communication with God is restored through Jesus (cf. Jn. 3:3–18; Heb. 10:19–22; 2 Pet. 1:4).

Second is the word soul. It is the immaterial part of our being—our essence—that which is described as our person, the seat of our personality. Our souls seek to know and communicate with the spiritual world through our spirits. Again, our souls (like our spirits) only understand God by sense perception until we are born again. Once redeemed, our souls can communicate with God by means of our renewed spirits, since the Holy Spirit resides in us.

For centuries, theologians have debated whether people are a trichotomy (spirit, soul, and body) or dichotomy (spirit/soul and body). All agree that everyone has a material body through which the inner being expresses itself. The Bible speaks of man being a dichotomy of “spirit” and “body” and “soul” and “body”; but it also speaks of man being a trichotomy of “spirit, soul, and body,” as in 1 Thessalonians 5:23 (cf. Heb. 4:12).

Paul’s prayer is that man’s spirit, soul, and body be “preserved blameless” while waiting for the Lord’s return. The prayer is not that we will be without sin but, rather, that our manner of living pleases God, so when Christ returns, no charge can be leveled against us for living ungodly lives.

ASSURING THE THESSALONIANS

Paul assured the Thessalonian church God answers prayer for
their sanctification: “He who calls you is faithful, who also will do it” (1 Th. 5:24). Paul gave three reasons for his assurance:

First, “He who calls you” speaks of God’s efficacious call to salvation, whereby the Holy Spirit works in someone’s life making him willing to receive Jesus Christ as Savior (cf. 2:12; 2 Th. 2:14).

Second, “He [God] . . . is faithful.” Faithfulness is a characteristic of God’s nature and refers to His reliability. We can trust God to fulfill every promise He makes. Daily trusting in God’s promises and seeing them fulfilled in our lives provides confidence that He will keep His promises in the future (cf. 1 Cor. 1:9; 10:13; 2 Cor. 1:18; 2 Th. 3:3; 2 Tim. 2:13; Heb. 10:23).

Third, God “will also do it.” The word do is emphasized and draws attention to the fact that God, who “calls” us to salvation, will complete what He started in our lives. Therefore, we can be confident that we are secure in Christ, who will keep us blameless until He comes. The promise is from God, who cannot lie (Num. 23:19).

APPEALING TO THE THESALONIANS

Paul closed his letter by asking the Thessalonians to pray for him and providing two brief exhortations: “Brethren, pray for us. Greet all the brethren with a holy kiss. I charge you by the Lord that this epistle be read to all the holy brethren. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. Amen” (1 Th. 5:25–28).

First is the apostle’s petition: “Brethren, pray for us” (v. 25). Pray is in the present tense, indicating Paul wanted the church to uphold him and his ministry team in continual prayer. Paul believed the church had a duty to do so. “For us” refers not only to Paul himself, but also to Silvanus and Timothy (1:1).

Second, the apostle said, “Greet all the brethren with a holy kiss” (1 Th. 5:26). This was the custom in Paul’s day. Men often greeted other men, and women other women, with a kiss on the cheek. The holy kiss had nothing to do with romantic affection. Rather, it was a way to communicate unity and love within the local fellowship. This gesture was often expressed when believers gathered for worship. It was also Paul’s way of telling the Thessalonians, “Give my beloved brethren a kiss for me,” indicating his love for them (cf. Rom. 16:16; 1 Cor. 16:20; 2 Cor. 13:12; 1 Pet. 5:14). Today in Western churches, Christians greet each other with a hardy handshake, pat on the back, or a hug to convey affection, care, appreciation, or unity.

Third, Paul told the Thessalonians of his purpose for this exhortation: “I charge you by the Lord that this epistle be read to all the holy brethren” (1 Th. 5:27). Concerned that his letter would not be read to others, he added a strong final exhortation at the end. The word charge means to adjure or solemnly command that they be bound by an oath to carry out his request.

The word you probably refers to the church elders or leaders, asking that they pledge themselves to carry out the request. Paul was emphatic that this letter be read to the congregation and even to other congregations. Notice, he adjured them “by [before] the Lord,” binding them by an oath before Christ to read the epistle to everyone.

Why such a strong demand? There are a number of reasons:

➜ The letter was full of encouragement to all the people within the church who had come out of paganism and were suffering persecution.

➜ It was full of instruction that these young believers needed to mature in their Christian faith.

➜ It contained words of correction to help them sidestep pitfalls in serving the Lord daily.

➜ It was the next best thing to Paul being there himself. Paul was unable to be at the church to pastor or teach. So the epistle was intended to guide these new believers. It carried the same authority as if Christ or Paul were there teaching them.

The word read implies not merely passing the letter around the church so everyone could read it but reading the letter publicly during services and special occasions. Paul concluded his epistle with a personal prayer: “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. Amen” (v. 28). He began with a prayer for God’s “grace” to be with these new converts and closed it with the same.

All of Paul’s epistles end by wishing God’s grace on those to whom he was writing.

It is my prayer that we all will take to heart the apostle’s teaching and put it into practice as we live for Christ each day.

by David M. Levy,
Director of Education and Ministry Relations and a Bible teacher for the Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry

PAUL’S PRAYER IS THAT MAN’S SPIRIT, SOUL, AND BODY BE “PRESERVED BLAMELESS” WHILE WAITING FOR THE LORD’S RETURN.

Paul continually offered “prayers” (v. 3) for the Thessalonians and exhorted them to do the same for him, Silvanus, and Timothy. Prayer was a major weapon against Satan’s attacks and provided them with strength to overcome demonic onslaughts (cf. Eph. 6:18).

Second, the apostle said, “Greet all the brethren with a holy kiss” (1 Th. 5:26). This was the custom in Paul’s day. Men often greeted other men, and women other women, with a kiss on the cheek. The holy kiss had nothing to do with romantic affection. Rather, it was a way to communicate unity and love...
THE BUCKET LIST

If today were your last day on Earth, would you be satisfied with your life?

Many people who have unclear answers to such a question create bucket lists. Making a bucket list has become a popular exercise to help define what constitutes a satisfactory life. A bucket list is a collection of things to do or experience before dying that, in some way, is supposed to make life more satisfying or meaningful.

The concept comes from the phrase to kick the bucket, which, in the vernacular, is a synonym for dying. The phrase’s etymology is difficult to pinpoint, but modern culture has embraced the idea of creating and then expending the energy and resources to complete a personal bucket list.

Yearning for some experience (or someone) that will make life fulfilling before time runs out is nothing new. The clever quip, “If only . . . then I can die happy!” subtly expresses similar thoughts. While some experts and life coaches highly recommend using a bucket list as a path to personal development and overall satisfaction in life, others consider it a morbid exercise that focuses on one’s expiration date.

THE REMNANT THAT WAITED

In ancient times, the Jewish people were conquered and dominated by one empire after another. As the years passed, the Chosen People began to lose hope in the promised comfort proclaimed by the prophets. As those hopes faded, they trudged through the daily challenges of life. Soon, few even remembered what they had hoped for and dreamed about.

So the vast majority of Israelites, even the religious scholars and leaders, chose to make the best of it by merely going along. A few looked to create their own solutions. Yet, there was still a small broken-hearted remnant that refused to give up hope as the people of the God Who Sees. These individuals continued to watch faithfully and pray, waiting for the long-promised comfort and redemption from their dreadful earthly existence.

In the midst of this political, religious, and cultural morass, a man named Simeon, apparently in the twilight of his life, had one thing on what we might call his bucket list: to see God’s promise of a Messiah fulfilled before he died. He was a righteous and devout man, a member of the remnant that tenaciously clung to the hope of Divine rescue. His life’s satisfaction was intimately intertwined with his prophetic hope, “Lord, if only . . . then I can die in peace!”

Led by God’s Spirit into the Temple, Simeon was vigilant. The only item on his bucket list was about to be crossed off. When Joseph and Mary brought their newborn son into the Temple, Simeon was ready. He went to them, took the Child in his arms and blessed God: “Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace . . . for my eyes have seen Your salvation” (Lk. 2:29–30).

The Temple was a busy place in the heart of Jerusalem. How many people passed by the infant without giving Him a second thought? Did He go unrecognized on the road from Bethlehem? Was there no one to stop Joseph and Mary and inquire about the child at the mikvahs (ritual baths) before they ascended the southern steps to the Temple Mount? What made Simeon different? Was he more righteous or devout than all the others? No. What seems to have set him apart is the fact that he was waiting for the Consolation of Israel (v. 25).

The Consolation of Israel is the peace and blessing accompanying the Messiah’s arrival. Consolation means comfort. A
promised time of comfort will be ushered in when Israel’s season of discipline will be complete, and God will rescue the Jewish people (Isa. 40:1–2). Simeon never lost hope in God’s promises. He was ready. He was watching. He was waiting.

He wasn’t merely loitering around the Temple in case something happened. He was there with a purpose. He waited, confidently expecting God’s hand to intervene in his life, in the life of Israel. He was looking forward to and was ready to receive someone or something. He waited vigilantly for the time to come to full term, when God would deliver the hoped-for promises of comfort and redemption in the Messiah. He didn’t know all the details.

LED BY THE SPIRIT

When the Infant Jesus, the God-Man, crossed the threshold of the Temple where the Almighty’s presence used to dwell, Simeon instantly responded with an embrace of worship, praise, glory, and eternal peace. We can hardly imagine how he felt while tightly holding the infant Messiah in his arms. His God. His hope. His salvation.

Simeon’s Spirit-led heart flowed with praise for the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, which led to the proclamation of blessings on Mary and Joseph. Standing there, their God-given son in the arms of a stranger, they were astonished at Simeon’s words. Salvation? A light to the Gentiles? The glory of Israel?

The Spirit led Simeon to the Temple for the distinct purpose of seeing the initiation of the fulfillment of the ancient prophets’ promise of the coming Consolation of Israel. And he was not alone. God has always preserved and continues to preserve a remnant of righteous believers among His people, Israel.

At the very moment of the divine revelation to Simeon, Anna the prophetess arrived to join in the impromptu time of worship. Giving thanks to the Lord, she quickly spread the word to “all those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem” (Lk. 2:38).

Yes, there were others who had not given up hope. They, too, were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem with the coming of the Messiah. The word looked in verse 38 is the same word used to describe Simeon’s “waiting” in verse 25. They were waiting for the comfort of the Messiah when He would rescue and redeem Jerusalem and the Temple (Isa. 52:9). The word for Anna’s thanks to the Lord in Luke 2:38 is rare and suggests a connection to Psalm 79 in the Greek Septuagint

where the Temple’s defilement and Jerusalem’s destruction are mourned and continual thanks given in anticipation of God’s promised salvation.

The joy and exultation among the faithful must have been awe-inspiring as word spread through the halls of God’s house that day. Clearly, seeing Jesus was life changing for Simeon and Anna. As the Scripture says, “Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but when the desire comes, it is a tree of life” (Prov. 13:12).

Obviously, many others missed or ignored the opportunity to find true peace and comfort in the promises of God that were wrapped up in the little bundle of life that day. But Simeon and Anna didn’t miss it.

Neither one is ever mentioned again in the biblical record. Yet Simeon’s bucket list was now complete, and he was at peace with the approaching end of his days. He had found genuine meaning and fulfillment in life and eternity. Satisfaction did not originate in his life experiences but, rather, in the faithful promises of God.

For many people, Christmas generates high expectations. Many want to feel loved and valued when they get together with family and friends. How those get-togethers turn out sometimes makes the difference between being satisfied in life or not. Yet, it is a well-known fact that for many, the Christmas holiday often produces pressure and disillusionment instead of joy.

Perhaps it’s time to follow Simeon and redefine what living a satisfied life actually means. Simeon probably lay down that night in absolute peace, knowing he was secure in God’s promises. He was satisfied with his life, ready and willing to leave this earth should the number of his days be at hand.

What are you looking forward to gaining from the upcoming holiday? Will your expectations make your life more fulfilling, more satisfying? This Christmas, be courageous. Wrap the arms of your heart around the Only Begotten Son of God in expectant hope and exuberantly declare your gratitude and praise for all to hear. It will change your life.

The joy and exultation among the faithful must have been awe-inspiring as word spread through the halls of God’s house that day.

by Clarence Johnson, the national ministries specialist and a Bible teacher for The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry
Leaders in Israel’s Christian and Druze communities have voiced support for Israel’s new Nationality Law, despite backlash from some in the nation’s minority communities who deem it discriminatory and offensive.

“No other [Arabic] Druze community has it better than the Druze community in Israel,” said Chairman of the Druze Zionist Council for Israel Atta Farhat. “I implore all of my brethren in the Druze community to avoid the trap set by the left and back the nation-state law as it is.”

The controversial law, which passed by a vote of 62 to 55 in late July, calls Israel “the national home of the Jewish people” and declares Jerusalem its capital; Hebrew its official language; the Jewish calendar its official calendar; and Independence Day, Jewish holidays, and Shabbat as national days of rest.

But it also secures the rights of minorities to use their own languages and calendars and celebrate their own holidays, and it recognizes Arabic as a “special status” language to be used in public capacities.

The law actually cements the rights of minorities, said Chairman of the Israeli Christian Aramaic Association Shadi Haloul. “Just look at what has happened to the Maronite Christians who are being persecuted in Lebanon, as well as other minorities there,” Haloul said. “As soon as Israel stops being the state of the Jewish people, . . . we will no longer be able to enjoy the freedoms and security Israel provides us. Israel recognized our special status as Aramean Christians and thus recognized our ethnic identity.”

The new law was added to Israel’s Basic Laws, the underpinning of the national legal system. “We enshrined in law the basic principle of our existence. Israel is the nation-state of the Jewish people, that respects the individual rights of all its citizens,” Israel’s Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stated.

JNS.org
U.S. INCREASES SECURITY ASSISTANCE TO ISRAEL

The U.S. Senate has passed the U.S.-Israel Security Assistance Authorization Act of 2018, a bipartisan piece of legislation that authorizes the United States to give security assistance to Israel for 10 years, regardless of which administration is in power.

The act, which includes a $38 billion aid package to Israel, encourages increased weapons stockpiles and U.S.-Israeli cooperative ventures on antidrone technologies, cybersecurity, and space. “The act seeks to ensure that Israel has the means to defend itself, by itself, against growing and emerging threats, including Iran’s presence close to Israel’s northern border,” the American Israel Public Affairs Committee said in a statement.

GAZA JUDGE CALLS FOR JIHAD AGAINST ISRAEL

Gaza Judge Sheikh Omar Nofal recently called for jihad against Israel, “an individual duty incumbent upon the entire nation” and one “nobody is allowed to forsake” in an interview on Hamas’s al-Aqsa TV network.

“The martyr [a Muslim who dies while trying to kill a non-Muslim] . . . is absolved with the first drop of his blood. The moment the martyr’s blood is shed, all his sins are absolved by Allah,” Nofal said. “When the rockets are raining down, our young people march toward martyrdom. . . . As soon as our enemies [Israelis] hear the sirens, . . . all of them—the police, the civil defense, and the soldiers—throw themselves to the ground or have a panic attack.”

Three days prior, Gaza Professor of Quranic Studies Abdul Samee’ al-‘Arabeed of al-Aqsa University told the TV network, “The Jews are behind every conspiracy,” and the Quran teaches Muslims “how to deal with this human garbage.”

UN EXHIBIT SHOWS HOW GAZANS ARE TRYING TO BURN DOWN ISRAEL

A recent exhibition at the United Nations headquarters in New York showed ambassadors and diplomats from around the world the damage Gazan terror kites and flammable balloons have caused in Israel.

An initiative of Israeli Knesset member Haim Jelin, the exhibit contained photos of nature reserves, fields, and agricultural lands before and after being attacked by Gazans, who have burned more than 7,400 acres of land by launching flying incendiary devices into Israel.

“The destructive fire terrorism not only threatens the lives of Israeli citizens, but also destroys the entire ecological system in the south and causes irrevocable environmental damage,” said Israel’s Ambassador to the UN Danny Danon.

POLL: PALESTINIANS DISINTERESTED IN ISRAEL NEGOTIATIONS

A new poll reveals more than 60 percent of Palestinians do not want the Palestinian Authority (PA) to engage in negotiations with Israel mediated by the United States, and 45.6 percent of Palestinians oppose renewing negotiations with Israel altogether.

The Jerusalem Media and Communications Center conducted the poll among 1,200 Arabs from Judea, Samaria, and Gaza. More than a third of those polled said they would vote for current PA leader Mahmoud Abbas if elections were held the day of the survey, and one out of five said they would vote for Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh.

ISRAEL HELPS ALLEVIATE AFRICAN POVERTY

The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and Israel’s Ministry of the Economy recently formalized a partnership to use Israeli agricultural technology to help alleviate poverty among African farmers.

“This initiative is an important platform for the Ministry of Economy and Industry to give the developing world access to Israeli solutions to the challenges faced by so many,” said Israel’s Minister of Economy and Industry Eli Cohen.

ISRAEL DISCOVERS CORAL-BASED KNEE IMPLANT

Israel recently completed its first successful knee surgery using a coral-based implant invented by Israeli startup CartiHeal. Aglic-C, a material derived from the exoskeletons of coral, may regenerate damaged cartilage and bone.

The surgery could be an important milestone in knee surgery, said Dr. Adi Friedman, who performed the operation. “The need for an implant that leads to the regrowth of damaged cartilage is genuinely needed in the orthopedic world, and we hope that the [clinical] trial will succeed, and that the implant will be the breakthrough that we have been waiting for for many years,” he said.

ISRAEL DEVELOPS NEW DRONE-BASED DELIVERY SYSTEM

A new Israeli startup company, Flytrex, has developed the world’s first drone-based delivery system. “The Israel-based company works by delivering parcels to pick-up points communicated to a user via text message. Users can then receive packages through a drop-down cable from the drone while it remains in the air,” Fastcompany.com reported.

Flytrex recently joined with AHA, Iceland’s largest supplier of restaurant delivery food, to deliver takeout orders to Icelanders in the capital of Reykjavik, a city divided by a large bay, JNS.org reported. “Almost half of Reykjavik will be able to receive delicacies delivered [in mere minutes] by drone right to their backyards, thanks to Flytrex,” JNS.org reported.

From news reports
I have lived in Jerusalem for 57 years, and I have seen many advertisements for special synagogue meetings where distant rabbis come to speak. Recently, I saw a poster advertising a rabbi who was coming to talk about the world, afterlife, soul transmigration, and hypnosis.

As I read the poster, I thought to myself, "That would be the best place to go to tell them about what they do not know—how to know the Lord according to His Word and how to be a light to the Gentiles."

So I went to the meeting. After the rabbi finished talking, he asked if anyone had questions. I had been waiting for this opportunity, and I quickly raised my hand. "Rabbi, you spoke for a few hours and told us many stories—none of which have to do with faith. Are we not the Chosen People of God? When we bring people the Good News, should we not bring it with the Bible instead of with hypnosis and rabbinical tradition? The Bible has no value in our faith anymore," I said.

"Who sent you here?" the rabbi asked. "No one," I replied. "I saw one of the posters. It said, 'All are welcome,' so I came. And since I believe in the Lord according to the Holy Bible (not according to rabbinical stories), it is my duty to come here to try to point you in the right direction. I believe in God, and the Bible was written not by people like you, but by the Holy Spirit of God."

The rabbi and those around me started to get angry as soon as I mentioned the Holy Spirit. As it is written in 2 Timothy 2:24, "A servant of the Lord must not quarrel but be gentle to all, able to teach, patient."

Sometimes it takes hours before you can mention Jesus.
“When speaking with such people, you cannot begin a conversation by talking about Christ—you must be patient.”

“Enough! We know who you are; you want to make us Christians!” one shouted.

“Why do you think that?” I asked.

“Because you speak about the Holy Spirit!” he responded. Then they asked me where the Bible mentions the Holy Spirit, and they did not want to see anything from the New Testament. So I opened my Bible and read the lament of King David in Psalm 51:11: “Do not cast me away from Your presence, and do not take Your Holy Spirit from me.”

Then I asked one of them to read Ezekiel 37:14: “I will put My Spirit in you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken it and performed it.”

I asked another to read Ezekiel 36:26–27: “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes.”

I asked them to read the verses so they would see they are from the Holy Bible. They saw for themselves—in black and white—that I did not come to them with a new faith. “Do you believe what you have read?” I asked.

One answered, “Yes, because it is written in the Bible. How could we not believe?”

Then I asked one of them to read from the “Forbidden Chapter,” Isaiah 53: “He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way; and the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all” (vv. 5–6).

They agreed this passage was from the Word of God. We had a good, long conversation.

—The Friends of Israel Archives, August 2004

IN THE NEXT ISSUE OF ISRAEL MY GLORY

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I certify that the statements made by me above are correct and complete. James A. Showers, President

Zvi Kalisher (1928–2014) was a Holocaust survivor who was known for his unswerving faithfulness to the Lord and his bold witness in Jerusalem. He was with The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry for more than 55 years.

Samuel
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