

CHRISTMAS WITH DR. LUKE BY

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INTRODUCTION

Dr. Luke is our primary source of information about the birth of Christ. Without his research and his Gospel we would know very little about the family and the background of our Lord. In this series of fifteen chapters we will explore the subjects that Dr. Luke calls to our attention. Some of them may seem

trivial, but when it comes to the greatest story ever told, nothing is too small to consider as a valid subject for study. Each chapter is independent of the others. If you have an interest in a particular topic you can go directly to that chapter.

Thanks to Dr Luke, you will see that the Christmas message is one that covers a lot of territory, and is filled with human interest topics. My hope is that by reading these chapters you will come to treasure more than ever what God did for us on that first Christmas.

CHAPTER ONE

1. AN ATMOSPHERE OF AMAZEMENT based on Luke 2:8-20

Human beings love to be amazed and filled with wonder. That is why they travel the world over to see the 7 wonders of the world and the million and more lesser wonders of God and man. That is why the constant craving for special effects in spectacular movies that take us out of dullsville into a world of wonder.

The amazing is always popular. Back near the turn of the century, Hodji Ali made his fortune by being amazing. In full view of the audience he would swallow peach pits, pennies, rhinestone rings, watermelon seeds and a whole series of small objects. Then he would bring up specific items at the request of the audience. Like the great fish in the book of Jonah, he could vomit for a profit {prophet}.

That was merely a warm up. While his assistant set up a miniature castle, Ali drank a gallon of water and then a pint of kerosene. The drum would begin to roll and he would spit out the kerosene in a six foot arc across the stage, setting the castle on fire. Then with the flames shooting high into the air, he would spit up the water and extinguish the blaze. The people loved it, for it was amazing, and people love to be amazed.

That is what the Christmas season is all about. It is about being amazed. The whole world, in shopping centers, is changed to convey a sense of amazement. The lights and decorations and colors are all changed to convey a sense of wonder. We are expected to respond, how wonderful, how beautiful, how amazing it all is! The world and the church cooperate once a year in an all out effort to create an atmosphere of amazement.

It is very Biblical to do so, for that is the spirit that characterized the first Christmas. After the shepherds had gone through the wonder-filled experience of hearing the angels and seeing the Christ-child for themselves, they spread the word, and we read in verse 18, "And all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them."

Amazement has three different levels very much like the three levels of heaven. There is the atmospheric heaven of the birds and the clouds. There is the astronomical heaven of sun, moon and stars. There is the angelic heaven of all the heavenly hosts and the Trinity. Human amazement begins on the highest level as the shepherds are confronted by the

wonder of the angels. But then the shepherds have to go back to tending their sheep, and day by day the wonder of it all would begin to fade. The challenge for them and for us is to keep the wonder alive and on the highest level. Let's look at the three stages of amazement, for just being aware of them will help us.

I. THE RESPONSE OF AMAZEMENT.

This is the first and highest level where we are confronted by the mysterious and marvelous and feel a sense of awe. Georgia Adams conveys a common experience of amazement in her poem Evening Awe.

**I am filled with awesome wonder
on moonlit, starlit nights;
Speechlessly I stand engrossed in
Such an array of sights.**

**Like a rich black velvet curtain
The sky hangs silently-
Studded with millions of diamonds
Shining so brilliantly.**

**Among the myriads of stars
Flung into outer space,
The dipper so majestically
Appears to take its place.**

**Each whirling, twirling planet spins
Within its orbit there;
The silvery moon hangs deftly
Suspended in mid-air!**

**Ah yes, the spacious firmament
In silent witness stands
To prove God holds this universe
Within His sovereign hands!**

-Georgia B. Adams

We have all been amazed at some time by gazing up into the sky. The wise men were more amazed than usual when they saw the Star of Bethlehem. In that state of wonder they were willing to give up a good chunk of their life to follow that star to the Christ-child. When they arrived they no doubt had the emotions of those who sing, "I stand amazed in the presence of Jesus the Nazarene."

We see an atmosphere of amazement everywhere in the New Testament when people confronted Jesus. When Mary and Joseph found Jesus as a young boy in the temple talking with the scholars, they were amazed. When Jesus began to teach, the people were amazed at His authority. When He began to cast out evil spirits, they were amazed at His power. When He healed people, they were amazed and they praised God. When He stilled the storm His disciples were completely amazed. The point is, there was an atmosphere of amazement that surrounded Jesus and His ministry, and we read in Mark 9:15, "As soon as all the people saw Jesus, they were overwhelmed with wonder and ran to greet Him." The response

of amazement was the normal response of men when they had an encounter with Christ. The next level we want to consider is-

II. THE RETREAT OF AMAZEMENT.

This second stage is a lower level and is the inevitable direction we must go. Just as Jesus did not permit Peter to build his three tabernacles on the Mt. of Transfiguration, and stay in that elevated atmosphere of amazement, so He does not permit anyone to go through life in perpetual wonder. The disciples were often amazed at Jesus, but after living with Him for some time, they went from being, sometimes awe-filled, to being sometimes, awful. They fought and bickered over issues of pride, and lost the sense of honor it was just to be in His presence.

Judas retreated so far from the glory of his first response that he lost the light altogether. But nobody escapes the detour off the super highway of amazement. That is just the way God made us. The thing that amazes me is how fast we can retreat from the atmosphere of amazement. Some years back, my parents visited us and we took them down town to see the sights. It was new to all of us as we saw the flowing water and trees, and all sorts of plants inside a modern building. It was truly amazing. But years later when we returned to hopefully again be amazed, the novelty was gone. It was a boring journey for the atmosphere of amazement had vanished. I experienced the retreat of amazement.

Amazement thrives on surprise and the unexpected. It has a hard time surviving in an atmosphere where all is known. I enjoyed the amazing surprises of the movie, Raiders Of The Lost Ark. But when I watched the film again on television, I was no longer surprised by the unknown, and I lost a great deal of amazement.

Earl Stanley Gardner tells of the fascinating experience of a traffic officer who was patrolling the highway one hot summer day. He found a place in the shade to pull over and observe the traffic highway one hot summer day. He found a place in the shade to pull over and observe the traffic. He saw a car which was acting strange, as a driver drove slowly along a creek road leading to the highway. He got his binoculars out, and to his surprise, he recognized the driver as his next door neighbor. He observed him stop the car, and get a bag out of the trunk, and lay it in the shade by the stream. He then got back into the car and left.

The officer was curious, and drove to the spot, and checked it out. He discovered a mother cat and six kittens. He quickly picked them up and drove with his siren blaring at high speed to his neighbors house. He ran around the back of the house and put the cats on his porch. He never told his neighbor what had happened, but delighted in hearing him tell others of the impossible story of how his cat and six kittens beat him home, when he drove off to abandon them. His neighbor lived in perpetual amazement at finding these cats purring in the sunlight on his back porch. The point is, had the officer told him what had happened, the amazement would retreat rapidly into oblivion. It was kept alive by the mystery of the unknown

Children are amazed at the commonplace because to them it is the unknown. They love it for they enjoy wonder. A little boy was asked when his birthday was and he said he didn't know. When he was asked why he didn't ask his parents he said, "because I want it to be a surprise." Children long to be surprised and amazed, and it is a mistake to tell them they are silly. You can bring about the eclipse of wonder and the retreat of amazement by forcing a child to move to rapidly out of the world of play and fantasy into the world of work and reality. The retreat of amazement is sure enough without provoking it prematurely.

We need to recognize the reality of the retreat of amazement, so we can work at

counteracting it. Christmas and communion have this in common—they are events which we repeat so often that they can lose their sense of wonder. They focus on the two great events of our faith—the birth and the death of Jesus. They are the beginning and the end of Him who is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. Because there is a retreat of amazement at these events of wonder, we need to look at the third stage—

III. THE RENEWAL OF AMAZEMENT.

The key to wonder is to recognize that we only know in part, and we see through a glass darkly. There is so much more to the familiar than what we know. We lose our sense of wonder because we think there is nothing new. The childlike mind says there is always something new. When I read Dr. Paul Brand's book, *In His Image*, I realized how little I knew about the wonders of the human body, and the fantastic intricate mechanism by which we live and breathe and have our being. We take it for granted, but there are few things in this universe more filled with wonder than this body we live in. After reading that book, I recognized just how true an insight St. Augustine had, when he wrote, "People travel to wonder at the height of mountains, at the huge waves of the sea, at the long courses of the rivers, at the vast compass of the ocean, at the circular motion of the stars; and they pass by themselves without wondering."

The value of having children around at Christmas time is that they help you keep wonder alive. We need, not only the Christ-child in the center of Christmas, but we need other children around the circumference of Christmas, for without childlike wonder you lose a lot of what Christmas is all about. Kenneth Wilson wrote, "Take the wonder out of Christmas, and you take a star not only out of the skies but out of eyes. Take away the soft edges of wonder, and you wind up only with hard questions. Take away the angels, and you have to start looking for the angles. Whatever else Christmas is, it is wonder's response to something bigger than life. Sometimes—and Christmas is one of the best times—the secret is not explain, explain, but enjoy, enjoy."

That is what it means to be childlike. The shepherds were adults, but they came in childlike wonder to behold the baby in a manger. The wise men were adults, but they came in childlike wonder to bow before the Christ-child. I see three ways to get on the road that leads to a renewal of amazement.

1. Research—both shepherds and wise men said let's go see. If you set out to see more and never be content with what you know, you can renew your sense of wonder.
2. Retelling—like the shepherds, share the message of Christmas with others. Just to get a child to see the wonder of it all will rekindle your own childlike amazement.
- 3 Remembering—the reason Jesus said to do this in remembrance of me is because He knew the rejuvenating power of memory. We have all found old pictures that brought back the emotions of the past. The past is never over, for by remembering it you can relive it in the present.

The wonder of Christmas is that God would send His Son into the world as a infant. We say you don't send a boy to do a man's job, but God did, and the wonder of it is that the boy got the job done. He did what all of history failed to do. He reconciled God and man. Gambling men would have put their money on Herod or Caesar, and big armies, and big budgets to solve the world's problems with evil. But God used a baby to win this war of the ages.

In Alex Haley's book, *Roots*, there is a scene where the slave Kunta Kinte drives his master to the big plantation house. He parked the buggy, and settled down to wait. He heard the music of the white folks as they danced, but then he heard other music coming

from the slave quarters. He got out of the buggy and went to the cabin, and there he found a man playing African music. He remembered hearing this music as a child. The man had come from his section of Africa, and they talked of home and the past. That night when he got back to his cabin, he laid on the floor and wept, for he almost forgot who he was and where he was from. The music had rekindled his memory, and he was restored to an attitude of amazement concerning his roots. So, when we come to Christmas, we are to look back and remember what God did for us through this baby he sent into the world. We are to remember that it was by means of this child that we gained the right to become children of God. We are to make Christmas a time of the year when we enter into an atmosphere of amazement.

CHAPTER TWO

2. THE ANGELIC ANTHEM based on Luke 2:8-14

Louis Pasteur, the French chemist, was the first to suspect that man's major enemies were invisible. He advanced the theory that all disease is caused by microscopic organisms called germs. His theory was challenged because some diseases like rabies produced no germs. He concluded that these particular germs were just too small to be seen by the microscopes of that day. In other words, he was saying some invisible things are more invisible than others.

Thirty years later the Dutch botanist, Martinus Beijerinck, filtered out all the germs from a diseased tobacco plant's juices, and yet the juice still produced the disease in a healthy plant. He called this disease-causing liquid a virus, from the Latin word for poison. This term eventually came to designate these smaller than germs trouble makers.

In 1931, bacteriologist determined that these viruses were smaller than the smallest cells. They are so small they are on the borderline between something and nothing. Yet these invisible realities have become one of the biggest issues of modern times. Science, the media, the medical world and the masses all believe in the reality of these invisible creatures. You would have a hard time finding a person who is skeptical about the reality of the virus. Yet we live in an age where millions are skeptical about the reality of angels.

The small and invisible are acceptable, but the big and invisible are too much to swallow for the doubter. It is too great a paradox to be large and still not be detectable to the senses of man. It makes sense to be hidden in minuteness, but to be hidden in hugeness is illogical. And so, the non-believer writes off the whole world of the supernatural, which includes God and His angels. Modern man is not necessarily happy with this choice, however. Norman Gary in one of his novels says, "you got rid of God and isn't it funny, something is still missing."

There are many Christians who also feel uneasy about angels. They have a strange malady of angelophobia-the fear of angels. They are embarrassed by angels. But Christmas forces angels on us, and there is no escape from them. They are in stores, on cards, on trees, on TV, in songs, and most of all, in God's revelation of the Christmas story. Amidst this awesome avalanche of angels we are forced to acknowledge them, and somehow assimilate them into our world view. We want to look at the angels and the Christmas story, and see just how relevant they are to the Christmas story, and thus to God's plan of salvation. The first thing we want to focus on is-

I. THE ANGELS APPEARANCE.

Verse 9 says, an angel of the Lord appeared to them. You can find a lot of places where an angel of the Lord appears in the Bible, but you will have a hard time finding a text where the angel of the Lord is joined by a great company of the heavenly host. Angels usually operate alone. They are messengers, and like human messengers they are loners. The messengers of ancient history were usually runners who ran alone, and not in a group. The pony express did not send out a group of riders, but each covered his territory alone. When God sent His messengers from heaven, one was a great plenty to get the job done. But here on the first Christmas we see a very unusual event. The angel of the Lord is not left to sing a solo, but is backed up by the greatest angelic choir that ever appeared on earth.

John heard this choir in heaven where they were praising God on their own turf. But never had anyone ever heard this angelic choir on earth. Heaven's music is breaking through the barrier between time and eternity, and men on earth are hearing heaven's sound. The only other record of their performing was at creation. There were no humans in existence to hear them at that time. So their singing at Christmas is a once in a history exclusive performance.

If some great singing group stopped their tour bus on a country road to sing for a few cow-hands in the field, that event would make big news. Famous singing groups just don't do such things. But here is the greatest singing group in all the universe making their first earthly appearance, not at Herod's castle, not in the temple, not in Rome, but in a field outside tiny Bethlehem. Their audience was not the dignitaries of the nation, but a handful of lowly shepherds.

The real wonder is that they appeared at all. The fact that they did makes it clear that from God's point of view the birth of His Son was the greatest event in human history. This angelic anthem was a guarantee that this would be the most celebrated birthday the world had ever seen. Their presence is just another factor in making this a one of a kind event. Jesus was a one of a kind baby, born to a one of a kind mother, for a one of a kind plan of salvation. It is fitting that the angels would at His birth make a one of a kind appearance.

Some say the angels are not relevant. They remind me of Whately who wrote about what he heard at the Grand Canyon, "Turning away from the sun set serenade of gorgeous colors bouncing off the Grand Canyon, a young woman said disdainfully to her companion, it just isn't relevant." Whately had to agree that from a strictly survival point of view the sun set and the Grand Canyon are not relevant. Violets and Orchids and most of the beauty of creation are not relevant to survival. But man does not live by bread alone. There is more to life than food and clothing and money in the bank if that is what you mean by relevant.

Man has more than a body to feed. He has a mind and a soul, and he needs a diet that nourishes the whole man. He needs mystery for the mind, and wonder for the soul, and this is where the angels become relevant. Their presence in Christmas guarantees that it will never lose its wonder, for they add the supernatural touch. There is not much about Christmas that is wondrous if you just look at the earthly scene. Stables are not known for their aesthetic value. The whole scene is very commonplace and earthly. If it was not for the appearance of the angels, the only sign of heavenly involvement in this story would be the star. They were the only living supernatural beings involved in the story. They keep it in the realm of wonder.

One of my granddaughters favorite songs is Twinkle Twinkle Little Star. Some day she will be able to sing the more scientific version-

Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star

**I don't wonder what you are.
What you are I know quite well
And your component parts can tell.**

That loss of wonder will never happen with angels, because we can never analyze angels adequately. They will be, until eternity, a source of mystery and wonder. That is their role in God's plan. They keep Christmas a day of mystery and wonder forever. There was a good reason why God chose this event for the greatest angelic choir ever. Albert Einstein once remarked that, " the most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder, and stand wrapped in awe, is as good as dead: His eyes are closed." The appearance of the angels in the Christmas story assure us that there will always be wonder connected with this awesome event.

Dr. Luke tells us there were a multitude of the heavenly host. This was one of his favorite words. He used it 23 times. All other New Testament writers only used it 7 times altogether. He is making it clear that this was no trio or even a sextet- this was a great multitude of angels. He was trying to make an impression here. It was his style. He wants us to get a sense of the staggering involvement of heaven in this earthly event.

**Angels and archangels gathered there
Cherubim and Seraphim thronged the air.**

This never happened before, and will not likely ever happen again on earth. This was the greatest angelic appearance of all time. And because it is so, it helps to make Christmas the greatest time of wonder and celebration. Next, lets look at -

II. THE ANGEL'S ADORATION.

The song of the angels sets the tone for all others who come on the stage of the Christmas drama. The angels adore Christ, and so we see the shepherds also adore Christ, and so do the wise men. To adore is to worship with intense devotion. Adoration is the key ingredient in the atmosphere of Christmas. The angels add wonder, but they also lead the way in worship as well. There is no need to wonder about what Jesus most wants for His birthday. There is no gift we can give better than what the angels gave that first Christmas-adoration.

**We may not have treasures of glory or gold,
Or perfumes to pour at His feet,
But, oh, if we knew of the worth of the Christ,
We would give Him our homage complete!**

**Our cherished desires we would open anew
And yield Him our hearts and our all;
As incense we'd offer our praises to Him,
Adoring, before Him would fall!**

**The Savior is worthy of all we can give,
Whatever our coffers may hold;
Oh, may we then pour out our treasures to Him
And worship as they did of old!**

These angels do not even need salvation, for they are not lost, yet they are praising God for His gift as if they were part of the redeemed. This tells us a lot about how angels feel

about man. Unlike the unseen virus which only has an interest in man's destruction, these unseen beings care about man and his salvation. They are not jealous that God has given His very best for man. They do not have envy, and fight the plan of God to populate heaven with these fallen beings. Instead, they sing as never before, with pure adoration of the love of God.

Angels are our friends, and they are on the side of light against darkness. We are not alone in this universe. There are a vast host of intelligent un-fallen beings who care about our salvation, and lead the way in praising God for providing us with a Savior. If you want the true Christmas spirit, then listen to the angels. The very essence of Christmas is adoration. We do not know what Christmas is until we feel the need to praise God. To sing glory to God in the highest with the angels is where it is at. This means we need to have received God's gift, and taken His Son as our Savior. Only those who have done so can know the true spirit of adoration.

Giving and being generous, and having a great time in spreading cheer and happiness are all virtues, and we do not want to knock them, but we need to see they fall short of the real spirit of Christmas. They are side effects of adoration. If you do not start where the angels started your Christmas can never be what God intended. We need to think-Glory to God. We need to feel-Glory to God. We need to sing-Glory to God. Horatius Bonar wrote-

1.

Glory be to Him who loved us
Washed us from each sinful stain;
Glory be to Him who made us
Priests and kings with Him to reign;
Glory, worship, laud, and blessing
To the Lamb who once was slain.
"Glory, worship, laud, and blessing"-
Thus the choir triumphant sings;
"Honour, riches, power, dominion"-
Thus its praise creation brings;
Thou art worthy, Thou are worthy,
Lord of lords and King of kings.
Glory to the King of angels,
Glory to the Church's King,
Glory to the King of nations,
Heaven and earth His praises sing;
Glory ever and for ever
To the King of Glory bring.

Christmas means salvation to man, but it means Glory to God, and it is never complete unless God gets adoration. If you want to give God the very best you can give, then follow the angels and give Him adoration. We need songs to adequately express adoration. Love songs are so popular because love needs music for its highest expression. The loving heart needs a poem and a tune. Love needs to be sung. That is what adoration is. It is love expressed in a song. Phillips Brooks wrote long ago-

The earth has grown cold with its burden of care
But at Christmas it always is young,
The heart of the jewel burns lustrous and fair;
And its soul full of music breaks forth on the air,

When the song of the angels is sung.

If the heavenly host sang as never before, and they were not even saved by the Savior they sang of, how much more ought we, who are saved by Him, be filled with songs of adoration? Let us remember that the appearance of the angels tells us Christmas is the greatest day of wonder in history. The adoration of the angels tells us, the best we can give to God in response to His gift to us, is the gift of worship and praise. Let us learn from these invisible friends that a true celebration of Christmas will involve wonder and worship. This is the message of the angelic anthem.

CHAPTER THREE

3. CHRISTMAS ANIMALS based on Luke 2:1-20

The angels, the shepherds, and the wise men, along with Mary and Joseph, dominate the scene around the Christ-child, who gave the world the gift of Christmas. But animals also play a role in the greatest story ever told. Being dumb, they could not sing of it or talk of it, and the result is their silence leaves them the most neglected creatures connected with the Incarnation. We usually look at the astronomical witness of the star, or the angelic witness of the heavenly host, but we seldom to never notice the animal witness to the advent of Christ.

There is no escaping the facts, however. In His birth our Lord Jesus identified with the animal kingdom. He was born in a stable meant for the shelter of animals. He was laid in a manger meant for the feeding of animals. The first sounds baby Jesus heard could have been the sound of animals. He was first announced to the shepherds whose whole life revolved around the care, feeding, and protection of animals. The wise men, who represented the Gentile world, made their journey to worship Him on animals. They were likely camels, although horses were not impossible. Mary likely made it to Bethlehem riding on a donkey. Later in His life, Jesus was in a context where He related both to the angels and animals. Mark 1:13 says, "He was with the wild animals, and angels attended Him." This was during His forty days in the wilderness. Angels and animals have this in common, they are both servants of God and man. They are both a part of the Christmas story.

The result of all these facts is a world of Christian art and poetry full of Christmas animals. The famous nativity scenes through the ages include the ox, donkey, sheep, camels, and often the dove. One of our most famous Christmas hymns, Away In A Manger, says, "The cattle are lowing the poor baby wakes but little Lord Jesus no crying He makes."

The emphasis on animals in the birth scene is not part of our contemporary life-style because the majority of people no longer live with animals. Back in the 12th century when everybody had a daily contact with their farm animals, they sang songs that stressed the role of the friendly beast in Christmas. They sang,

**Jesus our brother kind and good
Was humbly born in a stable rude
And the friendly beasts around Him stood.**

This song, sung over 800 years ago by Christians, reveals just how carefully they had thought through the role of animals in the Christmas story. They had each animal tell of what they contributed-

**Thus every beast by some good spell
In the stable dark was glad to tell
Of the gift He gave Immanuel.
I said the donkey shaggy and brown
Carried his mother uphill and down
I carried her safely to Bethlehem town.
I said the cow all white and red
Gave her my manger for His bed.
I gave Him my hay to pillow His head.
I said the sheep with curly horn
Gave Him my wool for His blanket warm.
He wore my coat on Christmas morn.
I said the dove, from the rafters high,
I cooed Him to sleep that He should not cry.
We cooed Him to sleep, my mate and I.
I said the camel yellow and black
Over the desert upon my back.
I brought Him a gift in the wise man's pack.**

All of this may seem superficial and sentimental to us as city people, but keep in mind God did not send His angels to announce Christ's birth to city people. He sent them to people who lived daily in relationship to animals. The Bible world was a very animal oriented world.

I think it is safe to say, every great leader of Israel, male or female, had a life strongly involved with the animal kingdom. Look at just a few highlights.

- 1. Adam and Eve dwelt in a perfect relationship with animals, and Adam even named them all.**
- 2. All of the Patriarchs had animals for their wealth, and the story of their lives could not be told without reference to the animal kingdom.**
- 3. Moses was a shepherd when God met him at the burning bush.**
- 4. David was a shepherd when called to be the king of Israel.**
- 5. Job was an owner of great herds of animals.**
- 6. Most of the prophets used animal imagery constantly, to convey their message.**
- 7. John the Baptist lived with the animals, wore camel skins, and ate locust.**

The list could be greatly expanded, but the point is Bible people were animal lovers. You would have a hard time finding any Bible hero who was not an animal lover. E.F. Schumacker went so far as to make this claim, "There have been no sages or holy men in our or anybody else's history who were cruel to animals or who looked upon them as nothing but utilities, and innumerable are the legends and stories which link sanctity as well as happiness with a loving kindness toward lower creatures."

Therefore, it follows that the greatest King of Israel, the promised Messiah, the Son of David, the Seed of Abraham, the fulfillment of all Old Testament prophecy, should also be in some way connected with the animal kingdom. No where do we see this connection stronger than in the Christmas story. Jesus was the only great person in Israel, as far as we know, to be actually born among the animals. Most would agree with John R. Rice who said, "It is unthinkable that any detail of the birth of Christ could fail to have a universal meaning for the race." The animal atmosphere is an example.

There are millions of stuffed animals given as gifts to children every year at Christmas.

This is more appropriate than we realize. Every major holiday has some animal associated with it for symbolic reasons. The turkey for Thanksgiving; the rabbit for Easter; the donkey for Palm Sunday; the eagle for July 4th. But for Christmas there is no single animal to symbolize it, for the whole animal kingdom is involved. Any animal can be a Christmas animal.

There is an old English wood-cut printed in London in 1631, which illustrates an ancient legend of how even the dumb animals spoke on that Holy Night. In the center of the picture is the Babe with Joseph and Mary, the angels above singing, and the cock crows-Christ is born. The raven in a tree asks-when? The crow replies-this night. The ox cries out-where, where? The sheep near the manger bleats-Bethlehem. It is not meant to be believed that animals talk, but to convey the idea that animals were involved in Christmas.

Much of the symbolism of the Bible is from the animal kingdom. The Bible is a literary zoo. I counted 61 different creatures that could be studied. There are more animals in the Bible than you will find in some zoos. The more we get away from the animal kingdom the more difficult it is to understand many parts of the word of God. If you took all the references to animals out of the Bible you would eliminate more of God's word than you can imagine. A big chunk of the Christmas story is also lost if you remove all references to animals.

The secular world has added a lot of animals to Christmas. The twelve days of Christmas are full of creatures. A partridge in a pear tree; two turtle doves; three French hens; four calling birds; six geese a laying and seven swans a swimming. Our secular culture has raised up one animal that has gained a great deal of popularity and that is Rudolf the red nosed reindeer. He has relevance because he plays the role the camels played in the New Testament story. They got the wise men to Christ with their gifts, and Rudolf gets Santa to the children with his gifts. It is a story of an animal that is a blessing to man.

Animals are such a blessing to man in the Bible that when the Christ-child grew up He took upon Himself the names of these animals. The two most outstanding being the Lion and the Lamb. These two names bring out the two positive characteristics of animals in their relationship to man, and help us see the relevance of the animals of Christmas. The lion represents sovereign service, and the lamb represents sacrificial service. Jesus came to serve and to sacrifice Himself for us. He humbled Himself to be born with the animals because He fulfilled the purpose of the animal kingdom in relationship to mankind in two ways we want to consider in more depth. First let's look at animals and-

I. THEIR SERVICE.

We have already noted that in our secular Christmas, Santa would be a helpless pedestrian without his reindeer. It does not take to great an imagination to see how Rudolf can be a symbol of the Christ who alone had the light, in this dark world, to lead men to receive the gift of salvation. Santa could not deliver his gifts without animal service. The New Testament has another parallel with Rudolf in the donkey Jesus rode on Palm Sunday. He could not have fulfilled the prophecy of the Messiah without the service of this animal. There are some amazing stories of how animals have served men at Christmas.

Jim Stacy was the local postmaster in Calico, California. He picked up a stray dog one day and took him on his rounds. After years of this, Stacy fell ill and was unable to work. But Darsey, his dog, knew the route so well he was able to do the job. Stacy fashioned a harness with double saddlebags and from 1883 to 1886, Darsey the dog delivered the Christmas mail.

In the British post office cats have been on the payroll for over a century. As late as 1953

the assistant post master general assured the House of Commons that female cats were getting the same wages and benefits as male cats. They provide a major service to man by assuring that he gets his mail. Before they hired cats the mice destroyed a lot of mail. In 1868 they began the hiring of cats, and the problem has been solved, and people have been getting their mail un-chewed ever since.

In our own country the famous Pony Express would have been impossible without the service of ponies. In the book of Esther all the Jews are saved by the service of animals in carrying a message to all the lands. Paul's life was spared by means of horses.

History is filled with examples of how animals provide man with service that is vital to his comfort and progress. John said of Jesus, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." That was his greatest service to mankind. He was also the Lion of the tribe of Judah. As such, he provided the service of a protector. The Lion, as king of the jungle, was used all through history as the symbol of protection. Huge statues of lions sat before the palaces of kings, and other important government buildings. The figures of 12 lions lined the steps leading to Solomon throne in addition to the two lions standing beside his armrests. God is represented by the lion, and Israel is, and Jesus is.

In one of the great prophetic messages of the Bible pointing to the Christ-child there is a strong emphasis on the effects He will have on the animal kingdom. In Isaiah 11 we read of the shoot that will come from the stump of Jesse. This descendant of David will be a righteous judge among people, but listen to what he accomplishes in the animal kingdom in verses 11 thru 9- "The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together: and a little child will lead them. The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The infant will play near the hole of the cobra, and the young child put his hand into the vipers nest. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea."

The Christmas scene of baby Jesus and the friendly animals surrounding Him is symbolic of what this baby will do for animals and men in reconciling them, and making them one family. Animals were hurt by man's sin, and they suffer in a fallen world. Christmas and the Incarnation mark the beginning of their restoration as well as our own. As the Lion of the tribe of Judah He came to save the animal kingdom from the fall, and all of the evil and suffering it has led to for animals.

Paul makes it clear that the salvation Christ brought is not exclusive to man, but covers all creation. Isaac Watts was a great animal lover and in his famous Christmas hymn, Joy To The World, makes it clear that animals are in on the joy. In the third stanza he writes, "He came to make His blessings flow far as the curse is found, far as the curse is found, far as, far as the curse is found." In other words, He came to bless the animal kingdom as well as man, for they too are under the curse. In Romans 8:20-23, Paul writes, "For the creation was subject to frustration, not by it's own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies."

Paul is saying that we are already saved in the inner man, but the part of us which is animal, the body, is not yet redeemed. We wait as does the whole animal kingdom for that final and complete salvation that saves the animal kingdom including our animal nature-the

body. When this happens the whole of physical creation will also be redeemed. This means that for all eternity animals will be our friends and our servants. Horse lovers will be delighted to note that even before eternity the horse is one of heaven's greatest servants. The horse pulled the chariot that swept down and took Elijah into heaven. The book of Revelation pictures Jesus riding His white horse to victory. Call it symbolic if you wish, but there is no way to escape the Biblical teaching that the literal animal kingdom will share in the salvation that Christ brought to this earth. Animal lover's often go to extremes, and I have heard of some who will not even eat animal crackers, but extremes ought not to block our minds to the Biblical truth about the positive relationship of man and animals.

In the middle ages there was a popular story that has become a modern day movie- **Androcles And The Lion**. Androcles was a runaway slave who met a lion limping with a thorn in it's paw. He pulled the thorn out. Later he was captured and sentenced to fight lion's in the arena. The lion loosed on him was none other than the one he had helped. The lion recognized him, and in gratitude licked Androcles in the face, and then protected him from the other lions. The Emperor was so impressed by this miracle he pardoned Androcles and gave him his freedom. Saved by a lion! All of us are so saved from the lion who goes about seeking whom he may devour by the Lion of the tribe of Judah. He will also save the animal kingdom from this lion, and man and beast will live in peace, and be of service to God. The second theme we want to consider about animals is-

II. THEIR SACRIFICE.

Animals have to die for us to live. It is their greatest service to man that they die for his life and pleasure. The first animals on record who died, did so to provide Adam and Eve with clothing. Their sacrifice was necessary because of man's sin. Millions of animals have died since in sacrifice for man's sin. Jesus is called the Lamb of God because He did, once and for all, what sheep had been doing all through history-dieing as a sacrifice for sin. The Passover lamb was sacrificed, and the people of Israel were spared by it's shed blood. Jesus became our Passover Lamb, and made it possible by His sacrifice for all to escape the judgment of God.

Now we no longer need sheep or any other animal for sacrifice. People in Bible times had to raise spotless and pure animals as part of their spiritual life of obedience to God. But Jesus made this unnecessary. Then the modern industrial revolution made animals unnecessary in many areas of life. The result is we have lost touch with the significance of the animal world. Yet everyday our lives are dependent on the sacrifice of animals-not only the fish, fowl and barnyard creatures, but the multitude of minute animal creatures that make our bodies function properly. Even the strongest vegetarian would be shocked if he realized how many tiny animals he consumes everyday in his water and his vegetables. No vegetarian would be alive today without the sacrifice of animals.

Sometimes even the animals not intended for human food are crucial for man's survival. When the German's surrounded Paris to starve them out in the Franco-Prussian War, the zoo became a food supply, and the people ate the kangaroo, the wolf, the camel and the elephant. The same thing happened to the London zoo in World War II. People were even eating giraffe cutlets. The furred, the finny, and the feathered all went into the frying pan for the salvation of man. Man saved the animal kingdom when Noah built the ark, and so it is fitting that the animal kingdom would often be the salvation of man.

We live in a culture where the humane society plays a major role, and where the animal kingdom is treated with high respect. There are also animal hospitals everywhere in any large city. Walt Disney contributed to this greatly by making animal creatures very popular

and person-like. C.S.Lewis has been to the Christian world what Disney was to the secular world. His series of Narnia books exalts the animal kingdom. The land of Narnia is under the rule of Aslan, the Christlike Lion. He created it out of nothing and thus we see the lion represents God. All of the animals think and talk and are raised to the human level.

In all his works Lewis pictures the animal kingdom as ideal, and then man comes along and makes a mess of it by his evil. Man brought down the animal kingdom and they had to suffer with him. But they are destined to be friends and rise again to the level of peace and oneness. In other words, the goal of God is a happy ending for man and animals together. Lewis pictures the universal chorus of praise in heaven as being, not of voices only, but of purrs, grunts and squeals of delight from the animal kingdom as they join man in this song of eternal thanksgiving.

When Martin Luther read Romans 8:21 about the creation itself being liberated from its bondage, he looked at his little dog and said, "Ja! Thou too shalt have a little golden tail!" The world of poetry is filled with such sentiments.

I do not know the future ways,
I can but dimly see,
Just what within that Unseen Land
There is of bird or tree:
But could that heaven my heaven be
If there were not some woodland friends
To meet with Christ and me?

The shepherds who went that first Christmas to see the Christ-child no doubt felt this way about their lambs. We forget that the lamb was often to the Jew what the dog is in our culture-the family pet. People have always loved their pets on a level close to children. When God saves families in the Bible, He saves their animals with them.

1. In the ark God saved animals as well as people. The promise He gave was to the animals as well as men. Read it and see for yourself.
2. In the Exodus animals were included in the greatest deliverance of Israel.
3. In the deliverance of Nineveh, because of their repentance, God made it a point that He had compassion not only on the children but on the animals.
4. God gave the Sabbath to save man from self-imposed slavery and He made it clear that animals were also to get that day of rest.

The whole plan of God is summed up by David in Psalm 36:5-6, "Your love, O Lord, reaches to the heavens, your faithfulness to the skies. Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains, your justice like the great deep. O Lord, you preserve both man and beast."

When Saul Kane is converted in a country drinking house, a very unlikely place, John Masefield in, *The Everlasting Mercy*, has him say a very unusual thing to describe what happened to him.

I did not think, I did not strive,
The deep peace burnt my me alive;
The bolted door had broken in,
I knew that I had done with sin.
I knew that Christ had given me birth
To brother all the souls on earth,
And every bird and every beast
Should share the crumbs broke at the feast.

From Eden to eternity animals are partners with men. When God saw that it was good after He had created the animal kingdom, He loved and enjoyed what He had made. He has no intention of letting the sin of Satan and the fall of man rob Him of an eternity of enjoying the animal kingdom. They will be a part of the new heaven and the new earth for the pleasure of God and man. That is why Jesus humbled Himself to be identified with them as well as with man in the Incarnation. Thus we are to look upon the Christmas animals, not as mere incidental props but as a very real part of the plan of God. We will begin a taste of the eternity God has planned if we learn to love, even in time, the Christmas animals.

CHAPTER FOUR

4. THE APPROACHABLE GOD based on Luke 2:8-20

Lucy is expounding on the meaning of Christmas and she says, "this is the time of the year that we show kindness and good will, when we accept others and welcome them into our home." Charlie Brown says, "why can't we be kind and accepting all through the year and not just at Christmas?" Lucy looks at him and says, " what are you, some kind of religious fanatic?" That is the way many people feel about those who would want to be a Christian even after Christmas.

There is something unreal about the Christmas spirit that only lasts till the lights and tinsel are put back into the attic. A seasonal Christian who reveals some kind of religious interest at Christmas only is not a real Christian.

It is not fanaticism but normal Christian living to have the Christmas spirit all year long. One of the problems with the Christmas season is that people feel they have to try and cram too much Christian living into too small a segment of time. David Grayson said, "I sometimes think we expect too much of Christmas day. We try to crowd into it the long arrears of kindness and humanity of the whole year. As for me, I like to take my Christmas a little at a time, all through the year." There is no magic in December 25 that cannot be experienced any other day on which you decide to honor the gift of God, and praise Him for the Lord Jesus.

The real fanatic is the one who thinks you can get your religious devotion done at Christmas-who thinks thanking and praising God is a minor part-time commitment that can be gotten out of the way through a special event or two. The gift of God is unreal to one with such a mind. It is not just the tree, but the whole of Christmas is artificial to those who do not treasure the gift of God everyday of the year.

In the comic strip "Tiger", two little boys are talking and the one says, "We got an artificial tree this year." The other boy asked, "Doesn't it bother you?" He replied, "No, not as long as the presents are real!" That is to be the Christians attitude. Everything can be artificial and superficial, but he or she will still have the Christmas spirit because God's Present is real. Ray Phillips said, "Christmas is real. It's the rest of the year that is a myth." If the gift of God is real then all of life is made real by this ultimate reality in Christ. The poet put it beautifully-

**Yet more and more we know Thee real,
And marvel more and more to see
Thine infinite Reality.
Reality, reality,
Lord Jesus Christ Thou art to me!
My glorious king, my Lord, my God,
Life is too short for half the laud,
For half the debt of praise I owe,
For this blest knowledge that "I know
The reality of Jesus Christ,"-
Unmeasured blessing, gift unpriced!
Will I not praise Thee when I see
In the long noon of Eternity
Unveiled, Thy "Bright reality"?**

In the popular children's story, The Velveteen Rabbit, by Margery Williams, the rabbit asks the toy horse that was so bald in patches because of hundreds of hours of being held and rubbed, "what is real"? The horse replies-"Real isn't how you are made. It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long time, not just to play with, but really loves you, then you become real". For some, the baby Jesus is just another toy they play with. Its fun, but they never really come to love the gift of God. But for those who do, Jesus is a gift that is loved and treasured not just at Christmas, but every day. He is real and not just a seasonal plaything. The poet says it so well-

**Lets have Christmas every day
The gladness and the heartfelt mirth,
Good will towards men and peace on earth;
The simple joy of giving things
To gain the joy that giving brings.
The practicing of what we preach
In word and deed, in thought and speech.
Lets have Christmas every day-
Its wrong to wait the weary year
to bring some fellow creature cheer.
We should adopt the better plan
Of doing good whenever we can.
But do it now, next Christmas may
Not come at all-Let's live today!**

If the Christmas gift is real to you, then the Christmas spirit will be real to you every day. This was the spirit of the shepherds. As soon as the angels were gone they said lets go see this thing that has happened. These men did not know it was Christmas for the holiday did not yet exist. It was just another day, but one of great excitement now. They did not say to themselves, we have seen the supernatural-angels have spoken to us- we will be famous. They did not run to reporters to try and get on the front page or discuss what memorial they should erect in memory of this encounter. Their field never became anything but a field for they had a proper focus on what was real.

Many a place where people have seen visions become places where people build temples, and others make pilgrimages to worship there. But this is all a dealing with the unreal. The

angels did not come to them to make themselves objects of worship, or to make the place a sacred spot of worship. They came to point the shepherds to Jesus. This was also the job of the Star of Bethlehem. It was to lead the wise men, not to worship the stars or anything in heaven, but to worship the Christ-child. The star and the angels were only means to point men to the Real, which was Christ. If the angels would have moved the shepherds to go to the library to study up on angels, and if the star would have moved the wise men to study astronomy deeper, they would have failed to achieve their purpose. Their one and only purpose was to move men to meet their Savior. They were great successes because that is precisely what they accomplished. John Erskine wrote,

Out of the midnight sky a great dawn broke,
And a voice singing flooded us with song.
In David's city was he born, it sang,
A Savior, Christ the Lord. Then while I sat
Shivering with the thrill of that great cry,
A mighty choir a thousandfold more sweet
Suddenly sang, Glory to God, and Peace-
Peace on earth; my heart, almost unnerved.
By that swift loveliness, would hardly beat.
Speechless we waited till the accustomed night
Gave us no promise of sweet surprise;
Then scrambling to our feet, without a word
We started through the fields to find the Child.

To find the Child-that was the goal. Anything that takes us off the path that leads to Christ is not part of God's plan. The job of the angels and the star was finished when the shepherds and the wise men bowed before the Christ-child. The shepherds were the most unique people in all of history in that they were the only people to receive a direct message from God about the birth of His Son. The wise men got an indirect message by means of the star. We want to look closer at the shepherds, and the sights they saw, and the song they sang. Consider first-

I. THE SIGHTS THEY SAW.

First of all let's see them as the sight-seeing champions of the Christmas story. Their job was to watch their sheep, and so they were used to seeing things at night. They would see sheep that began to wander, the prowling wolf, the thief in the night who would seek to build his flock at their expense. Watching was their life, and this night they saw more than human eyes have ever seen. These lowly shepherds were the most blest of all men in history as far as getting in on the sights of Christmas.

They saw The Angel of the Lord.

They saw the Glory of the Lord.

They saw the Heavenly Host.

They saw the sign of the baby lying in a manger.

They saw Mary and Joseph.

They saw people amazed when they told their story.

For variety, intensity and quality, there is no record of anyone who can match the shepherds in their experience of the sights and sounds of Christmas. They left their sheep to go see the Lamb of God, and as far as we know, they were the only people besides Joseph and

Mary to see the Christ-child in the manger.

They were not terrified of this child, as they were when they were confronted by the angels, even though He was the King of the angels. His glory was veiled in flesh and was non-threatening. That is why God entered history as a baby. No one can see God and live, but God in the flesh can be seen safely. God came down to our level where He could be seen and approached. In the Old Testament God was not approachable. Even in the temple only the high priest could approach God, and then just once a year.

The baby in Bethlehem changed the relationship of God and man. The lowly shepherds who were totally unfit to approach God in the temple, are now invited to come into the presence of God in the flesh, and to worship Him. They are to come with joy, and not with fear and trembling. They were the first to see this amazing reality that Christmas is about God making Himself approachable. Deity has always been frightening for man. The majesty and power of God are an overload for man's emotional system. But Christmas changed all that.

The reason we need to focus on the Christ-child over and over again every year, is to keep us from losing sight of the truth of the Incarnation. Jesus is no longer a baby, but Lord of all at the right hand of God. He is in a state of glory and majesty that makes men fall in fear before His presence, as John did when he saw Jesus in heaven. We need to be reminded over and over that this is the same Jesus who was the babe in Bethlehem. The babe of Bethlehem is the perpetual sign that God is always the approachable God.

People will go out of their way to approach a baby. You can be a total stranger but people will talk to you if you have a baby. Nobody moves to the other side of the mall when they see you coming with a baby. Instead, they move closer to try and see. A baby draws and attracts people. A baby is approachable, and this is the message of Christmas to all people about God. He is not to be feared and avoided. He is to be approached in faith for He cares enough about man to have given His very best-Himself.

The simple shepherds were the first to see the sign of God's approachability. The wise men eventually came as well, and so all men of all classes are welcome to approach God. Jews and Gentiles, poor and rich, simple and learned, all have this in common, they can come to God with the same sense of peace that you have in approaching a baby. The peace on earth the angels were singing about was not the peace of lack of war. It was the peace of heart and mind that men can have in approaching God. Christmas marks the celebration of the beginning of man's being able to come to God in peace knowing that He is approachable. He is not God above us, and beyond us, but He is God with us.

How do you describe the Hallelujah Chorus to a deaf man? How do you convey the majesty of the Grand Canyon to a blind man? How do you help a man who has lost his sense of smell grasp the fragrance of the orange blossom festival? This was God's problem-How do you as an infinite God communicate to finite man that you love him and that you are approachable? The answer is the sight the shepherds saw-the babe of Bethlehem. Not only was Jesus a baby to make it clear that God is approachable, but he was born in stable for the same reason. It was not an accident that Jesus was not born in the inn. Had He been born inside He would have been an insider, and unapproachable by the outsider like the shepherds. If there would have been room in the inn for Jesus there would have been no room for the shepherds in the Christmas story. But Jesus was born in a place where He was totally approachable. They did not have to get an appointment. He was right out in the open in public territory. He was not like all the other Kings of history where you would have to have a special invitation to approach him. Jesus was approachable to even these lowly

shepherds.

They saw God and did not die, but lived on a higher level of peace and joy ever after. If like these shepherds we too can see the sign and what it signifies-God with us-God approachable, then we too can have the profound peace and joy they had that first Christmas. Now let's go from the sights they saw to-

II. THE SONG THEY SANG.

The shepherds were like our early western cowboys. They sat out under the stars and sang songs. David was a shepherd, and he sang many of his songs out under the stars, possibly even in that same field the shepherds were in. The point is, shepherds were often good singers, and these particular shepherds had a theme to sing about as never before. They echoed the angelic anthem as they glorified and praised God. They no doubt sang about this event for years to come. All we know is that the shepherds song was the beginning of Christian hymnology. Millions of songs have been composed since to praise God for the giving of His Son.

What is a Christmas song? It is simply a means by which we express our enjoyment of God. Do you think the shepherds enjoyed their experience of seeing the Christ-child? Of course they did, and they passed on that enjoyment to others by expressing it in praise.

J. B. Phillips tells of an exciting evening in a youth center in London. The youth were cheering and singing, and after awhile he suggested they spend some time in worship. One of the youth said, "we don't know what you really mean by worship." Phillips responded, "It's three cheers for God." We cheer our school, and we say three cheers for the red white and blue. We cheer for what we enjoy and what we are thankful for. So why not songs of praise as three cheers for God? God is an enjoyable God, and He is so because He is the approachable God. This is the good news of Christmas, and wise are those who take advantage of this reality. Jesus said, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life, no man comes to the Father but by me." God gave us His Son so we could have a way to come to Him. If we take God's gift of Jesus, and trust Him as our Savior, we have found the path of Life that leads us to the approachable God.

CHAPTER FIVE

5. CHRISTMAS BABIES based on Luke 2:1-20

Elenor Cicok had a three year old daughter who developed an emotional block and ceased to talk. She never said a word, not even mama when she wanted her mother. It was a terrible ordeal as she went month after month in silence. Her mother taught her about God and prayer, and read to her about Jesus. Her favorite picture in the book was of Mary holding baby Jesus.

After two years of this, one day just before Christmas she was walking past the church with Vicki, and she took her in. There was the Virgin Mary and the child. The girl suddenly broke her silence and said, "Look! Baby Jesus!"

Babies have a way of opening up voices that otherwise are silent. Go walking through a mall with a baby and total strangers will come up to you and talk about the baby. They would never dream of approaching you without the baby present. Babies break down walls like

nothing else. Babies may not talk, but they motivate more talk than most anyone. The Christmas baby is no exception. He has probably stimulated more words than any thousand babies ever born.

Not all talk of babies is positive. Someone asked little Tommy, " how do you like your new baby sister?" "She is all right," he said, "but there's a lot of things we needed more." There was nothing man needed more on that first Christmas, however, than the baby Jesus. He was the first born so he did not stimulate any of the jealousy problems that often come with a later child. Johnny said, "sure there are no favorites in this family! If I bite my fingernails I get a rap on the knuckles, but if baby eats her whole foot they think its cute." Jesus did not have this sort of thing, but he did have to contend with Herod who had no room in his heart for babies announced as the King of Israel. He so despised this infant king that he killed all the infants in Bethlehem that could have been him. He marred that first Christmas with tragedy because of his anti-baby attitude.

We do have to give Herod credit for one thing, he knew the potential of a baby. He was not so naive as to think a baby is nothing to worry about. He recognized that a baby can be a serious threat because babies represent the future, a future that will be changed because of them. Herod, by his hostility to a baby, bore witness to the reality of baby power. When God wants to change history He starts with a baby. That is why the Bible is so full of begats. Somebody is always having a baby, and that meant a new chapter in God's plan.

For four hundred years Israel was enslaved in Egypt. Then baby Moses was born, and that marked the beginning of a radical change for God's people. Their deliverance began with the deliverance of this one baby. Moses had to be saved to become the savior of his people.

So in the New Testament story, the deliverance of all men began with the deliverance of the baby of Bethlehem. He had to be saved from Herod to become the Savior of the world. Save a baby and you may be saving a family, a race, a nation, or a whole world. Baby power is a major factor in all of history.

In 1809, Napoleon was the master of Europe and all eyes were on him. But the future really belonged to the babies born that year. That was the year for the birth of Lincoln, Gladstone, Tennyson, Poe, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Cyrus McCormick, Chopin and Mendelssohn. These babies gave the world a creative future that outweighed all the damage done by Napoleon. Europe was thinking of battles, but it was the babies that would change the future. The decisive battles are all forgotten except to a few historians, but the decisive babies are remembered by millions.

Wise men recognize the baby power in history. Socrates said, "Could I climb to the highest place in Athens, I would lift my voice and proclaim: 'fellow citizens, why do ye turn and scrape every stone to gather wealth and take so little care of your children, to whom one day you must relinquish it all?'" He was wise enough to see the obvious. The people of God in the Old Testament could see it as well for their hope of salvation hinged on babies.

God's very first command to Adam and Eve was in Genesis 1:28 where he says they are be fruitful and multiply so as to fill the earth and subdue it. In other words, by means of babies man would conquer the rest of creation. When they sinned and fell God did not change His plan for it remained baby centered. We read in Genesis 3:15 that the offspring of Eve would ever be in conflict with the offspring of Satan, and that Eve's would crush the head of Satan's. The very first promise of salvation was centered in a baby. Baby power has always been the hope of man because that is how God intends to save man. God confirms this again by His promise to Abraham that by his seed all the families of the earth will be blessed. The

reason Christmas is a universal celebration is because it celebrates the birth of the baby that fulfills that promise. The Baby of Bethlehem is the central focus of the entire universe, and the entire plan of salvation.

This explains the reason for the child saving stories of the Old Testament. God had to spare Isaac for the sake of His promise. God had to spare the seed of David for the sake of His promise. David had many sons but they were all killed by family in-fighting. Only one child was left by the name of Joash. The house of David hung by the single thread of one little baby boy, but one was enough. By means of that baby God kept the line going to fulfill the promise in the baby boy of Bethlehem.

Plutarch's story of Themistacles has him saying of his own little baby at his mother's breast, "That child is master of the world!" His friend asked, "How can that be?" Themistacles answers, "The Athenians are masters of the Greeks; the Greeks are masters of the world; I am master of the Athenians; my wife is the master of me; and this little child is the master of his mother. Therefore, this child is the master of the whole world!" If this was true of that baby, how much more was it true of the Babe of Bethlehem who made the world, and now had come into His world to redeem it? Someone described Christmas as the story of a baby going after a lost ball to make it his own. Jesus came into this world to retrieve the ball he made. It was His by right of creation, but now He was going to make it His by right of redemption.

But why come as a baby? Why not as a grown man riding in from the desert on a white stallion to take over the government of His people? This baby business seems so slow. Why mess with years of immaturity and the need to grow? God could have taken a short cut and skipped all this baby stuff. But instead, this baby stuff becomes the dominant theme of Christmas. Dr. Luke makes the two long introductory chapters of his Gospel, baby centered. They are detailed accounts of the birth of John the Baptist and Jesus. Matthew, likewise, devoted the first two chapters of his Gospel to the babies of the ages, and to the birth story of Jesus and the wise men. Christmas is baby oriented. We have more detail about the babyhood of Jesus than any other period of his life until his public ministry began. Let's look at how Dr. Luke is baby centered in two ways. First look at his emphasis on-

I. BABY CENTERED COMMUNICATION

By this I mean baby talk and talk about babies in his first two chapters. Dr. Luke even tells us about pre-natal communication. It sounds too spectacular to be true, but it is confirmed by modern studies to be a reality. In Luke 1:41-44, we read of how Elizabeth tells Mary that as soon as she greeted her the baby in her womb was so affected by the sound that he leaped in her womb for joy. Can babies be affected by sounds outside the womb? Do they receive some kind of communication from their external environment? Two Japanese scientists, Ando and Hattori, did a study with two groups of infants. The first group spent their prenatal months near the Osaka airport while the second group lived in a quiet neighborhood. Babies from both groups were delivered at a hospital located under the flight pattern. Those babies that grew up in their mother where the plane noises were common were five times more likely to sleep through the sounds of the planes overhead. But those babies that did not live near the airport would wake up screaming about 50% of the time when the planes flew over. They demonstrated that the fetus does hear and adapt to the sounds of its environment.

Anthony De Casper, at the Univ. of North Carolina, did elaborate studies that showed babies even develop a preference for certain sounds before they are born. He devised a nipple attached to an audiocassette player. If the baby sucked in a pattern of long sucks one

tape would play and if the baby took short sucks the other tape would play. The baby could choose the sounds it would hear. One tape played the mother's voice and the other tape played a strange woman's voice. Believe it or not, new born babies soon learn which method of sucking gave them the mother's voice, and that became their choice.

He asked 16 pregnant women to read the book, *The Cat In The Hat*, twice a day to their unborn fetus for the last six and a half weeks before birth. Then shortly after birth these babies were given the sucking test with their mother's voice on both tapes. But on one she is reading *The Cat In The Hat*. On the other she is reading another child's poem. The babies consistently preferred *The Cat In The Hat*.

The point is, babies do hear in their mother's womb, and they are affected by what they hear. All that Dr. Luke records about the environment of John and Jesus in their mother's womb is not irrelevant. He tells us of two expectant mother's who gave each other joy and comfort, and of an environment of song with Mary and Zechariah praising God. An atmosphere like this has a definite impact on babies in their mother's womb. The Bible would support the idea that it is never too soon to start influencing your baby by positive communication.

But all of this is pre-Christmas communication. On that first Christmas the Angel of the Lord was the first to speak a baby centered message. He said to the shepherds, "today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you." I checked other translations and sure enough this baby is said to have been born to them. The RSV puts it even stronger, "for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior." Now we know the Christ-child was born to Mary, but the angels message makes us wonder just whose baby was it? The angel of the Lord seems to be communicating that this baby is born to all who need a Savior. And if this is the case, every sinner who has ever lived and who ever will, has had a baby born to them. The shepherds were all males, yet they had a baby born to them.

There is no other baby in the history of humanity that is anything like this baby of Bethlehem. If He is everybody's baby, then the whole human race becomes potentially one family again in this baby. All were one in Adam, but that oneness was shattered, and the race became scattered and divided. But now in this baby, born to all, the only universal baby in history, all men become one again, and are related to the degree to which they relate to this baby. This baby becomes the basis for all men to be one family again. Anyone who receives this child as being born to them becomes a part of the family of God. This is baby power to the highest degree.

Jennifer Forsthoffer needed a bone marrow transplant to stay alive. Neither parent had the right tissue, and so all depended on the birth of another child. Seven months later Jennifer's brother Eric was born. He became the youngest donor in U.S. history. That new born baby became her savior. What Eric was to Jennifer, baby Jesus was to the whole human race. The salvation of man depended upon a perfect sacrifice for sin. The baby of Bethlehem was the only baby ever born who could supply that need, and be our Savior.

This is a great tool for witnessing. You can ask any person if they have ever had a baby born to them. If they say yes, you can ask if it made them related to every family on earth. When they question your sanity you can share how the baby of Bethlehem does just that when we receive Him as God's Gift to us. If they say no, you can point out again that the Babe of Bethlehem was born to all who need a Savior-to all who know they have sin they cannot conquer and wipe away-to all who face death with no assurance they can live forever. The Gospel can be communicated in such a baby centered way, and this is wonderful for almost everybody loves a baby. When they can see what the Christmas baby means to them,

they can be moved to open their hearts and give Him room.

The value of baby centered communication is that it stimulates curiosity. Everybody wants to see the new baby. When the shepherds heard of the baby born in Bethlehem, their response was, lets go see, and they hurried off to see the baby. A baby is a wondrous thing. The miracle of birth is a miracle that science cannot erode. That is why a baby is such a great tool to led men to God. A baby forces men to be in touch with the mystery of life. The poet put it-

The wonderment
in a small child's eyes,
The ageless awe
in the Christmas skies;
The nameless joy
that fills the air,
The throngs that kneel
in praise and prayer...
These are the things
that make us know
That men may come
and men may go,
But none will
ever find a way
To banish Christ
from Christmas Day...
For with each child
there's born again
A Mystery that baffles men.

There have been billions of people who have lived on this planet. Millions never became toddlers. Millions never became teens or young singles. Millions never became middle aged or old. The one thing they all have had in common is that they were all babies. Babyhood is the most universal characteristic of mankind, and God's Son, the Savior of mankind, was also a baby.

So tiny, soft and crying,
He hardly looked the part,
Of one sent by God Almighty
To change the human heart.

The wise men did not come to see a star, they came to see a baby. Nobody is truly wise nor do they grasp the essence of Christmas until they see it is histories greatest example of baby power. Next, let's look at-

II. BABY CENTERED CELEBRATION.

When people have a baby we congratulate them. They feel rewarded for their long wait, and they express their joy in some form of celebration. We have already noted that the first person to celebrate the Incarnation was John the Baptist. He leaped for joy even in his mother's womb. Mary soon got into the spirit and was singing, "My soul praises the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior." Then when Jesus was born the angels joined in the celebration, and we read in verses 13 and 14, "Suddenly a great company of the heavenly hosts appeared with the angel, praising God and saying Glory to God in the highest." There was celebration in heaven over this unique baby.

Then when the shepherds checked it out and found the baby, verse 20 says, "The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen." Every being who saw the baby of Bethlehem was soon in a state of celebration. Today this celebration circles the entire globe.

Babies can touch people that may not be touched by anything else. Nancy Bingham, in Oklahoma, just ran into her neighbors house to make a phone call. While she was there she saw her car being driven away. Her baby was in the back seat sleeping. She was frantic, and then things even got worse. The news came on that Wolf Marker, the outlaw, had just escaped from the local prison. She screamed in despair for she feared she would never see her baby again. She and her husband had waited ten years for this baby. Nobody ever prayed harder for a child, and now it was taken from them. The county roads were swarming with police, and neighbors were looking for the escaped convict.

Nancy just wept and prayed for hours, and as darkness fell, so did her hope. But then she heard a sound on the front porch. She ran to the door, and when she opened it there was her baby with this note attached, "I'm sorry, I didn't know your baby was in the car." This hardened criminal had risked getting caught to bring back her baby. She was so touched by his being touched by her baby, she began to hope he would get away. He didn't, but he revealed that even bad guys can be moved to compassion by a baby. Not all bad guys are as bad as Herod. Some cannot bear to hurt a baby. God made Christmas baby centered because baby power touches almost every human heart. Helen Steiner Rice put it-

God sent the little Christ Child
So man might understand
"That a little child shall lead them"
To that unknown "Promised Land" . . .
For God in His great wisdom
Knew that men would rise to power
And forget His Holy Precepts
In their great triumphal hour. . .
He knew that they would question
And doubt the Holy Birth
And turn their time and talents
To the pleasures of this earth. . .
But every new discovery
Is an open avenue
To more and greater mysteries,
And man's search is never through. . .
For man can never fathom
The mysteries of the Lord.
Or understand His promise
Of a heavenly reward. . .
For no one but a little Child
With simple Faith and Love
Can lead man's straying footsteps
To higher Realms Above!

Christmas is a baby centered celebration because God used a baby to bring us back into

fellowship with Himself. Molly Brooks wrote,
Christmas is love
tugging men back to God
with the powerful clasp of a
tiny hand
reaching out from a bed
of straw.

Jesus is the only person in history who chose to be a baby. No other baby ever had a choice. This tells us just how important the baby centeredness of Christmas is to Him. The message of Christmas is not that the angels came; that the shepherds came, or that the wise men came, but that the baby came. The baby that would make it possible for all men to become a part of the family of God, has come into the world. Thank God for this Christmas baby. "To those who receive Him, to them He gave the right to be called the children of God." Take Jesus as your Saviour and you have eternal life as part of God's family. That is the ultimate in baby power, and it can be yours through this Christmas baby.

CHAPTER SIX

6. THE COMPLEXITY OF CHRISTMAS based on Luke 1:26-45

Approaching the Christmas season in 1972, Fred Putman decided to have an evening in front of a cozy fire. He used two boxes of matches, one pint of started fluid, and the Sunday addition of the New York Times, and still could not get the fireplace burning. Bent on romance by fire-light, he decided to drive to the Hideaway Lodge in the nearby mountains. As they approached this fireplace equipped paradise, he through his lit cigarette out the car window and started a forest fire. It devastated 382 acres of timber, and burned the Hideaway Lodge to cinders. Thus he demonstrated one of the finer points of Murphy's Law, which is, if several things can go wrong the one that will go wrong is the one that will do the most damage.

I am sure that Joseph and Mary felt their lives were being controlled at times by Murphy's Law. They had a series of things go wrong and it seemed like there was no end to their bad luck. First of all, Mary was pregnant out of wedlock. Today this is still high on the stress list, but back then it was high on the death list. You could be stoned for this back then.

The Angel of the Lord helped them get through this crisis, but then they got hit with government red tape and had to go to Bethlehem just as Mary was due to deliver her child. But this was not the last straw. When they got there the town was so crowded there was no room in the inn. Joseph didn't burn it down, but the end result was the same. They had no place to stay, and were forced to camp out with the animals in a stable.

Life had dealt them with one major inconvenience after another, and they must have wondered if God had made another deal with Satan, like the one he made concerning Job. They must have felt like they were on Lucifer lane. This would be an especially tempting conclusion when they heard Herod was out to kill their baby, and they had to flee to Egypt to save him.

When the Savior of the world has to be saved, and his parents have to be uprooted and live like exiled criminals, then you begin to see what Murphy's Law is all about. It is about a fallen world where nothing is guaranteed to go smooth. Even the plan of God to save the world has to work it's way through the maze where Murphy's Law can strike at any time. If you long for a trouble free life, you are in the wrong world-that is the next time around with a new heaven and a new earth. But the only way to get to that one is to get through this one. Even God's own Son could not escape the reality of a fallen world.

The point is, nobody is picking on you when-

1. Your leak proof seals leak.
2. You need tools to get a child proof cap off your medicine bottle.
3. The day after your warranty runs out, your appliance ceases to work.
4. The tool you drop while working on your car rolls under the car to the exact center.
5. The repairman will never have seen a model quite like yours before.
6. If you keep something because you may need it, you never need it.
7. If you throw it away you will soon need it.
8. Your best made Christmas plans can fall apart and your dream gift become a nightmare.

The bright and shiny and fully assembled toy you see on display in the store is an illusion. What you actually buy is a box of parts, some of which are already pre-broken. Tom Mullen, in his book Birthdays, Holidays And Other Disasters, gives us one man's perspective on Christmas toys-

The box will come equipped with a complete set of directions so simple that any Ph.D. from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology could follow them in a year-if he had

a crew of men to help and a psychiatrist standing by.

In short, for those gifted few who, as the saying goes, are "handy about the house," putting things together under

the pressure of Christmas expectation is less than a traumatic experience.

To many of us, however, who cannot hang

pictures straight or dismantle an electric razor for cleaning, the entire situation breeds inferiority feelings that make Charlie Brown seem like an egomaniac.

Thus, our children feel neglected because they have a wagon which has one wheel that refuses to turn. We broil our hamburgers on a grill so wobbly that burning coals roll from side to side. Our sons end up playing with dolls because the jungle gym we purchased is lopsided, undoubtedly due to the fact that we used a hammer to pound the "short uprights" over the "long uprights" when, according to the directions, one was to "slip easily over the other"!

He goes on to deal with batteries not included, toys that won't work, stores that are closed and other tales of woe that are nearly endless. The measure of misery around a Merry Christmas because of things that go wrong is vast. The more complex our world gets the more things there are to go wrong. The complexity of Christmas is the result of the complexity of life. It is not just Christmas, but all of life that is complex.

Joseph and Mary had a lot of complexity surrounding the birth of Jesus. They had to flee

to Egypt for several years. How they paid their taxes is beyond me. How they left a forwarding address which Herod could not trace is beyond me. Maybe they didn't pay their taxes and had an awful debt when they returned. Nobody knows about the hardships and burdens they carried. All we know for sure is life was hard for them. They were exiled and away from all their family and friends. The first birthday of Jesus was in Egypt with none of their family to celebrate with them. They were not at home for Christmas which has become a major objective in our culture. One of the secular songs popular at this season says,

Oh, there's no place like home for the holidays,
For no matter how far away you roam,
If you want to be happy in a million ways,
For the holidays you can't beat home sweet home.

The paradox is that the birth of the one who made this universal family tradition so precious was born away from home, and His birth forced His parents to be away from home for several years. We often see the first Christmas through rose colored glasses tinted by centuries of tradition. But the plain facts are that Mary and Joseph had a very difficult time with all the events surrounding that first Christmas. The goal of all this complexity is to make it possible for all men to get home to God where they can dwell forever in the Father's house. But meanwhile, to get to that end, everyone involved had to leave home.

1. Jesus had to leave His Father's throne and kingly crown. He did not get back home for 33 years.

2. Joseph and Mary left Nazareth and did not get back for several years.

3. The wise men left home in response to the star and did not get back for many months.

There was complexity in many lives that first Christmas, but let's focus in on that which Mary had to endure. First let's just note-

I. HER COMPLEXITY

When the angel Gabriel came to her it says in verse 29 that she was greatly troubled. This is the only place this Greek word is used in the New Testament. It means to trouble thoroughly. Many people are troubled, but only Mary is said to be troubled from her head to her toes. The angel responded to her by telling her not to be afraid for she had found favor with God. He knew she would be afraid, and needed assurance that he was there with good news.

When he told her she was to have a child she was confused and asked how it was possible since she was a virgin. He assured her that nothing was impossible with God and that she would conceive by the Holy Spirit. He surprised her with the news that Elizabeth was also having a child. God was breaking into history by means of the two most unlikely women. One was beyond child-bearing years, and the other was not yet ready to bear a child. God chose the too old and the too young to change history. God loves the challenge of complexity, and will use people for his purpose that nobody else would choose. Everyone is a potential tool in God's plan. It was complex for Mary but we see next

II. HER CONFORMITY.

Mary responded to a very complex situation with a spirit of submission. She did not demand a detailed theological or medical explanation of just how an old lady and a virgin were going to have children. She dealt with complexity by acknowledging that all things are possible with God, and she just put herself in His hands. Her willingness to, by simple faith, conform to God's will is, no doubt, why she was chosen by God to be the mother of His Son

None would dare to criticize Mary if she would have shed tears of fear and frustration. If she would have said to Joseph, "I don't know how much more of this I can take! Now we

have to flee to Egypt to save our child and not be able to take him back to our families. Our life is uprooted and chaotic and I am a nervous wreck." If she ever felt that way it would be understandable, but we have no record of any such negative emotions. All that is recorded of Mary shows only her noble spirit of conformity to the will of God. She said only, "May it be to me as you have said."

A Christian travelling by plane told of taking off in the rain. It was dark and dreary, but as the plane climbed it broke through the clouds and into the dazzling light of the sun. One of the passengers said, "I suppose every day is a sunny day if we can only get enough altitude." Mary was able to do this, and rise above the complexity of her situation and conform to the will of God knowing that He would accomplish His purpose if she would just conform and obey.

Then, we see another way she coped with the complexity. Let's consider-

III. HER COMMUNITY.

Mary did not bear the burden alone, but she hurried off to Elizabeth where she had a trusted person to share with who was also a part of God's plan. God does not expect us to be loners in the complex issues of life. Even the Lone Ranger had his Tonto, and Robinson Crusoe had his Friday. God expects everyone to have a community of at least one person to share with. God Himself is a community of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is the essence of His nature to be a community of communicating Persons. God is never alone for He is by definition a community. We are Godlike when we have another person we can share with as we deal with life's complexities.

Even in the Trappist Monastery, where they are not allowed to talk, there is an exception on Christmas. They can talk all day that day for this is a day of communication, and for the building up of community. There is a need for community all the time for most people, for in this fallen world we tend to feel lonely and insecure. Christmas often magnifies this insecurity for many. Ben Kenshaw wrote in his book, *Plain Bread*, about his insecurity. He wrote,

I can remember going to bed and lying there with my eyes wide open for what seemed like hours. I was actually afraid to go to sleep for fear I might die before Christmas morning came. "Now you just watch," I said to myself. "You just watch me die tonight. All those good things are going to happen tomorrow on Christmas and I'll die and miss everything."

I didn't, of course, and it turned out to be a very good Christmas. But the struggle between feelings of security and a developing inferiority complex were all underway. The sense of stress and turmoil had been planted by some alien hand. As they grew, they struggled constantly to crowd out the warmth and love so often demonstrated by my mom and dad. Looking back, I have no doubt whatsoever that they loved me, and I can only remember one argument between the two of them. Yet, being a human in a fallen world, I had a hard time holding onto the feeling of being loved.

His testimony must reflect the feelings of millions of children. We need constant reassurance that we are loved by God and by others and that we are an accepted part of the community. We are broken to some degree, and are like the world of toys, and we do not function the way we ought to. We need community to function at our best.

You will notice that Mary did not sing her song of praise alone, but rather, when she was

with Elizabeth. In fact, all of the Christmas songs of the N.T. were sung in community. The angels sang in the presence of one another and the shepherds. The song of Zechariah was a public praise before his neighbors. And Mary and Elizabeth both were filled with the spirit of praise in the company of each other. Even John the Baptist, as a fetus, leaped for joy in his mother's womb in the presence of Jesus in his mother's womb. Singing and praise is a community experience usually. It is in the fellowship of the body that we most often feel like singing the praises of God. This is effective in helping us cope with the complexities of Christmas and all of life.

Christians, be joyful, and praise your salvation,
Sing for today your Redeemer is born.
Cease to be fearful, forget lamentation,
Haste with thanksgiving to greet this glad morn!
Come, let us worship, and fall down before Him,
Let us with voices united adore Him.

Mary coped successfully with the complexity of that first Christmas by means of conformity to heaven and community on earth. May God help us to do likewise as we approach Christmas. The complexity of life and Christmas is offset by the simplicity of God's plan of salvation. By simply trusting Jesus as Saviour we can have eternal life and enjoy forever being in the family of God. Take God's simple offer of life in Jesus, and escape all the long range effects of the complexity of Christmas.

CHAPTER SEVEN

7. CHRISTMAS IS CONTAGIOUS based on Luke 2:8-20

Celestine Sibley tells of her father saying to her mother one grayish December morning, "the lumber business is going badly. It looks like a poor Christmas this year." She cried out, "A poor Christmas-shame on you! There is no such thing as a poor Christmas! Times can be hard and people poor but Christmas stands by itself as glorious and unmatched by anything else in history."

Here was a woman who had an enthusiasm for Christmas for she saw it as a celebration of good news that all the bad news in the world could not alter. A poor Christmas was a contradiction in terms. You might just as well speak of a poor ocean, a poor moon, a poor sun, or a poor galaxy. There are some things you just can't diminish, and Christmas is one of them.

Christmas is a celebration of a glorious event that all the powers of hell cannot make not to have been. It is too late for a poor Christmas to ever be. The spirit of Christmas has spread around the world. Ever since that night the angels infected the shepherds with this spirit, it has been contagious. We usually connect the word contagious with disease and the spreading of germs from one person to another. But if you look the word up in the dictionary you discover it applies to positive things too. Enthusiasm can be contagious, and praise can be contagious. The communication of any influence to the mind or heart can be

become contagious.

This is what we see happening on the first Christmas. Visitors from another world brought something into earth's atmosphere. It is a good thing angels came before the age of science. Scientist worry about alien contamination. When moon rocks were brought back to earth they were worried they could contain some organism that could spread diseases for which we had no cure. They kept these rocks isolated until they were thoroughly checked out. They wanted no alien germs on our planet.

Can you imagine what they would have expected these Christmas angels to go through if they put rocks through such restrictions. They would have insisted that they stay in some sort of angelic delousing chamber before they were permitted to communicate with men. The risks would be enormous that these beings could spread something that would radically alter the human race. The fact is, they did just that. These angels were contagious with the good news of great joy. This spirit broke through the barrier between heaven and earth and infected the shepherds. They were instantly cured of their fear, and filled with enthusiasm to see the announced child in Bethlehem. Verse 17 says, "When they had seen Him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child." What they had was contagious, and they began to spread it to everyone with whom they had contact.

Before the first Christmas day had ended the world had an epidemic on its hands, for the Christmas spirit was contagious. It was spread by mouth from one person to another. If you were a carrier you could give it to a lot of people very quickly.

Satan and many of his mad scientists have tried to prevent the spread of this contagious spirit. They have labored hard to find a cure, but to no avail. The Christmas contagion has leaped all boundaries and spread into all the world. A single carrier of the Christmas spirit can infect unlimited numbers of people.

The guidepost, some years back, told the story of an American family in France. The parents and three sons were having a perfectly awful time. Their car broke down, their hotel was a dump, and they had to walk in the rain to a drab little joint for dinner. The wife ordered a meal in French and got something she didn't want. The husband called her stupid and their attitudes matched the negative atmosphere. A French couple at the next table were not exactly helping. The father slapped one of his children and started him crying. A German couple on the other side were obviously arguing even though they could not understand a word they were saying.

The only happy person in the place was an American sailor who sat by himself writing a letter. An old French flower woman came in and tried to sell flowers at each table, but no one was in the mood for flowers. She sat down and ordered a bowl of soup. "Can you imagine," she said to the waiter, "I haven't sold a flower all day so it's soup for me on Christmas Eve." They all sat there in heavy silence, never dreaming that there was a contagious spirit about to invade their lives.

The American sailor finished his meal and walked over to the flower woman. He said, "Merry Christmas. I want two of your little courages. How much are they?" She said, "One franc apiece." He said, "I'll take two", and he handed her a twenty franc note. "I'll get change", she said. And he said, "Don't bother, it is my Christmas present to you." Then he came over to the table of the American family and gave the wife one of the courages. He pressed the other into his letter and said, "Merry Christmas everybody", as he walked out into the night. The atmosphere in that restaurant exploded with the Christmas spirit. The old flower woman began to dance and wave her twenty franc note. She invited the piano player to join her for a feast. He began to play happy music and the customers all joined in

singing. The boy who was slapped, stopped weeping and joined his father in beating out the rhythm with his fork on a glass. There was such a jubilant spirit of celebration that people going by came into the restaurant and joined in the singing. That sailor was a carrier, and through his mouth he infected the whole atmosphere with the contagious joy of Christmas. What a bug this Christmas bug is. When it gets into your system, it cures you of the negatives that plague your life.

Germs and the Gospel have this in common—they are spread by word of mouth from person to person. It is not true that only bad news travels fast. Good news can spread like wild fire. It did on the first Christmas, and we read in verse 18, "And all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them." This good news was not only contagious and spreading like wild fire, it was having a potent impact on all who were touched by it. They were amazed; they were astonished; they were in a state of wonderment. All of these things are conveyed by the Greek word describing their symptoms as they are infected with the good news of Christmas. From Satan's point of view, the Christmas spirit was like a plague he could not stop. He tried to stamp it out in its early stages, but Herod's plot failed, and the good news kept spreading. The Gospel germ had too much virility for his anti-Christ attack. It kept spreading from person to person, and today it has spread around the world. From Satan's perspective, it is the greatest plague in history.

I would like to make a medical examination of the spirit of Christmas. A diagnosis of this contagious spirit will help us see its major symptoms more clearly. Diagnosis is a Biblical word. Paul in Acts 25:21, appeals to Caesar for a hearing. The Greek word for hearing is diagnosis. It means thorough or complete knowledge. Paul wants Caesar to hear the whole story, and have a complete grasp of all the facts. When a doctor diagnoses you it means they get a complete knowledge of your symptoms, and thus are able to identify the disease you have.

There are two major symptoms of the Christmas spirit. If you have these two symptoms you can be diagnosed as being a carrier of this contagious spirit. If we put all of the persons in the New Testament who were infected with this spirit, under the microscope, these are the two symptoms we find. First is-

I. WONDER

Awe, astonishment, and wonder were the clear symptoms of all who were involved in the Christmas story. The wise men saw the wondrous Star of Bethlehem, and they were moved to come to worship the child. You do not worship what does not create wonder. There has to be some degree of awe to stimulate worship. That is why people are more likely to praise God as they look at the Grand Canyon than when they look at a mole hill. The spectacular and wondrous compels the mind to think big. When you think big you tend to think of God. The Star of Bethlehem was big and awesome, and it produced wonder in those wise men. This is the first symptom of the Christmas spirit.

The angels produced this same symptom in the shepherds. Their glory lit up the Judean field, and the shepherds were filled with wonder as they heard the angels sing. Their wonder compelled them to run to town to see the great sight of the new-born King. After they saw the Christ child their wonder was magnified, and they amazed everyone they knew with their awesome experience.

The Greek word describing what they did is the word right next to diagnosis in the Greek concordance. It is *diagnorizo*, and it means, to make known thoroughly and completely. The NIV translates it, "They spread the word." They told everybody every detail with such enthusiasm that it was contagious. The wonder was thus spread in an epidemic of

amazement.

Let's be honest with the facts. All of us would be filled with wonder if we saw a bright special star in the sky that was moving. All of us would be filled with wonder if we were confronted with angels in the middle of the night. The wise men and the shepherds were not unusual men for catching the wonder that God sent into the world that first Christmas. It would take an unusual person to escape the contagion of such awesome signs.

We don't have to put ourselves down because we can't match their spirit of wonder. We could if we saw the star and heard the angels, but we only have the record of their experience. You can't expect to hear a man describe his awe at looking at the Grand Canyon, and feel the same wonder that he did. Wonder naturally decreases with each step that you are removed from the actual experience. We have no star to follow and no Christ child to see. This was history that can never be repeated and experienced by anyone again. Even the most elaborate Christmas play or film cannot reproduce the emotions of the original cast. This is not required to have the Christmas spirit, anymore than it is required that we have the same emotions as George Washington, to have the spirit of freedom and love for our land.

But wonder, to some degree, is a key symptom, and that is why it is important to reflect on the miracles and providences of God surrounding the Incarnation. James Kestle wrote,

Somehow God weaves the strangest things
Into a pattern fair
He took an angel song, a star,
A Hebrew peasant pair,
Some shepherds on Judean hills
And unknown wise men three,
A stable cold and dark and damp,
A manger 'neath an inn
And now
A weary world kneels hopefully
Before the Babe of Bethlehem!

We cannot feel the intensity of the wonder of the wise men and shepherds, but on the other hand, we experience a wonder they did not. We have the wondrous history of the spread of their contagious Christmas spirit. It spread to many hundreds and even thousands in their life time. But we see this spirit spread to many millions, and change the lives of people in every culture around the globe. Their wonder was based on the immediate impact in their lives and in their community. Our wonder is based on the long range impact of that first Christmas on the whole world. To contemplate the lives touched by the message of the star, the angels, and the shepherds is to be filled with wonder that a baby could alter the whole course of history. Richard Crashaw wrote,

Welcome all wonders in one sight!
Eternity shut in a span.
Summer in winter, day in night
Heaven in earth, and God in man.
Great little one! whose all-embracing birth
Lifts earth to heaven, stoops heaven to earth!

If you enter into the wonder of Christmas you reveal that you have the Christmas spirit, for wonder is a primary symptom, and it is contagious. The second symptom we see is-

II. PRAISE

It all started with Mary in Luke 1:46 where she begins her famous song, "My soul praises the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour." The father of John the Baptist, Zechariah, was next in Luke 1:68, "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people." Then came the angelic praise in Luke 2:14, "Glory to God in the highest." And then that of the shepherds in Luke 2:20, "The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told."

The Christmas spirit can easily be diagnosed in those who lift their voice in praise to God. That is why music is such a vital part of Christmas. Music is the instrument of praise. Christmas songs are about praise to God for His wondrous gift, and the love that would motivate the gift of His Son. The fastest way to get infected with the spirit of Christmas is to start praising God for what He has done for you through His Son. This sort of praise is very contagious. If you let it start coming out of your mouth, before you know it, it has infected your heart, and your mind, and your whole attitude can be changed. Then it will leap from you to others, and they will be infected. Praise is contagious, and just like fear it can spread rapidly.

Herod chose to be a carrier of fear, and when he heard of the birth of the King of the Jews, we read in Matt. 2:3, "When King Herod heard this he was disturbed and all Jerusalem with him." Here was one man with a negative fearful attitude about Christmas, and in no time he had infected the whole city. This was evil contagion that Satan hoped would kill the spirit of Christmas. Fear is Satan's antidote to praise. If he can get people infected with fear he can break the fever of praise. That is why we need a persistent inclination to focus on the fascination of the Incarnation, so we can maintain the sense of inspiration that makes us carriers of the Christmas spirit. Let Satan rob you of the two symptoms of wonder and praise, and he has cured you of this contagious spirit. Do not let this happen, but be filled with wonder and praise that others can see in you that it is true-Christmas Is Contagious.

CHAPTER EIGHT

8. THE ENJOYMENT OF GOD based on Luke 2:8-20

One of the biggest attractions in all of history was the smallest man alive-General Tom Thumb. He was only 25 inches tall and weighed only 15 pounds. Over 20 million people paid to see him sing and dance. He charms his way into the hearts of the greatest people of his day-Queen Victoria of England, Queen Isabella of Spain, the Duke of Wellington, and Abraham Lincoln, just to name a few.

He was born January 4, 1838 as Charles Sherwood Stratton. Oddly enough, he was a big baby weighing 9lbs. 2ozs. at birth, but at 5 months old he weighed 15lbs. 2ozs., and that is where he stayed. In this way he was radically different than Jesus, for Dr. Luke tells us in Luke 2:52, that he grew in wisdom and stature. Jesus grew up as a normal man physically.

Tom Thumb did have some things in common with Jesus, however. Both were born as sons of a carpenter. Jesus was not conceived by Joseph, but he was his earthly father. Both

began as little mites who became mighty. Both remained single all their lives. Both drew large crowds. All of these are trivial and incidental. That which they really had in common was their adoration of their heavenly Father. Tom Thumb wrote, "I read the Bible every day, and am fond of reading the New Testament. I adore my Creator and know that He is good to us all. He has given me a small body, but I believe He has not contracted my heart, nor brain, nor soul. I shall praise His name evermore."

The smallest man who ever lived, and the greatest man who ever lived, had in common with each other the spirit of worship. Tom Thumb praised God for his little body with its big heart and soul. The angels praised God for the little baby of Bethlehem who would grow up and cause people to praise God all over the world. The more you examine the Christmas story, the more you discover that the one thing all of the persons involved had in common, was the spirit of praise.

Mary begins her song, "My soul praises the Lord." Zechariah's song begins, "Praise be to the Lord." The angels suddenly appear, "Praising God and saying glory to God in the highest." The shepherds in verse 20, "returned, glorifying and praising God."

One of the major differences between a Christian Christmas and a secular Christmas is the praise to God. The secular soul does not rise above the materialism of the season, but the spiritual soul recognizes that the essence of the celebration is in praising God for the Gift of His Son. The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. This is also the chief end of Christmas. The way to have a merry Christmas is to do what all the characters did on that first Christmas—they enjoyed God, and they praised Him..

We are to enjoy God forever, but we do not have to wait until eternity to begin this enjoyment. We start now, and the way we enjoy God is by praising Him. Praise is not only a pleasure for the receiver, but for the giver as well. This is a case where we can see it is more blessed to give than to receive. We are, no doubt, more blest in the giving of praise to God than He is by receiving it. To be a praiser of God is to be in the highest state of joy. All other happiness falls short. The goal of Christmas is to enjoy God.

Martha was a wonderful Christian woman, and Jesus loved her greatly, but she was so busy preparing a meal for Jesus she did not enjoy Jesus. She missed the enjoyment of his presence and His teaching, and the result is she was rebuked for trying to rob Mary of her enjoyment of these things. Jesus said Mary made the right and wise choice. The point Jesus was making was that he wants to be enjoyed. His greatest enjoyment is in being enjoyed. This is God's greatest pleasure as well. More than service even, God wants us to enjoy who He is, and to express that enjoyment in praise. The simplest definition of worship that I have come up with is—the enjoyment of God. If you truly praise God you are enjoying God, and thereby fulfilling the very purpose for your existence.

The angels and the shepherds had this in common on that first Christmas— They were enjoying God, and what He was doing in history. When a Christian says "Merry Christmas," it is to mean a whole lot more than, enjoy your gifts, your food, your family, your friends, your parties, etc.: It is to mean, above all else, enjoy God! In various places in the Bible even the rocks, and the trees, and the mountains break forth in singing the praises of God. The chief end of everything is to praise God. Happiness is expressed in praise. James 5:13 says, "Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise." Singing, praising, worshiping, and being happy are all linked together in what it means to enjoy God.

That is why it is surprising that there ever was a debate about whether angels sing or not. I cannot conceive that God would make intelligent beings who can behold His glory and the wonders of His creation, and withhold from them the gift of music and song. Heaven is

always pictured as a place of praise, and it would be cruel to be in this environment of perpetual praise and never be able to join in the joyful expressions of thanksgiving through song. To know God and His love and not be able to sing His praises would be more like hell. This is the state of the fallen angels who have lost the presence of God, and, therefore, have also lost the enjoyment of praising Him in song. The essence of hell is the loss of the enjoyment of God. Satan and his fallen angels lose the essence of heaven, which is, the enjoyment of God.

The angels on that first Christmas gave us a glimpse of angelic enjoyment of God in their song. It is of interest that the very first Christmas sermon that was preserved refers to this. The sermon is by Telesphorus, the Bishop of Rome in 137 A.D., who said in that message, "...that in the holy night of the Nativity of our Lord and Savior, they do celebrate public church services, and in them do solemnly sing the angel's hymn....." All through history Christmas has been a time of songs and praise. This is what men and angels have in common-the ability to enjoy God and express that enjoyment in song. Paul Gerhardt in 1653 wrote,

All my heart this night rejoices
as I hear far and near,
Sweetest angels voices
Christ is born, the choirs all singing,
Till the air Everywhere
Now with joy is ringing

What was the purpose of the angels appearing to the shepherds? It was obviously their goal to get the shepherds to enjoy God and what He was doing, along with them. Don't be afraid the angels said for their goal was not to scare the shepherds and make them fearful of the supernatural world. Instead, they invited them to share in the secrets of the supernatural world. They brought good news of great joy for all the people. Angels are not exclusive. They do not want to sing God's praises to the exclusion of man. They want man to join them in their songs of joy. After they told the shepherds where to find the baby Messiah, they returned to heaven for they expected man to carry on the songs of praise on earth. They would enjoy God in heaven and they expected man to enjoy God on earth. The message of Christmas is, because God came to earth, we can, even in this fallen world, taste of heaven, and enjoy God now in time.

The two things everyone most desires are happiness and health. Christians who enjoy God can be the world's greatest Santa Claus, for they can help people receive these gifts by sharing the Gospel of God's love in Christ. Ultimate happiness and health are found in the enjoyment of God. Prov. 17:22 says, "A cheerful heart is good medicine." What can make a heart more cheerful than the enjoyment of God? When people receive God's gift of eternal life in Christ, they receive with him the hope of eternal health and happiness. That is why it is such good news, and that is why joyful praise is at the center of the Christmas celebration. Philipp Nicolai wrote,

Now let every tongue adore thee!
Let men with angels sing before thee!
Let harps and cymbals now unite!
Heaven's gates with pearl are glorious,
Where we partake through faith victorious,

**With angels round thy throne of light.
No mortal eye hath seen,
No mortal ear hath heard such wondrous things;
Therefore with joy our song shall soar
In praise to God forevermore.**

Singing at Christmas is not a mere trimming, but one of the main purposes of the season. It is not the sweet potato, it is the turkey. It is not the ornament, it is the tree. Whatever helps us to enjoy God is a vital part of the Christmas experience. Music and song have always been a key means to this end. They get the mind and the body stimulated to praise God.

If everyone who enjoyed God, when Jesus was born, expressed that in praise, then we ought to do so also. Praise in song is a natural response to a major event. When a nation is born a national anthem is born too. Major things lead to songs, and the most major event of history was the birth of the Son of God into human flesh. Michael Harbon tells of the cowboy who rode up to the Grand Canyon and said, "Something mighty big sure happened here." The manger scene is to Christianity what the Grand Canyon is to nature. We are to look at it with an awesome awareness that something might big sure happened here.

When Nixon was president, he got overly excited about Americans landing on the moon, and he said, "The planting of human feet on the moon is the greatest moment in human history." If we spent a month out of each year celebrating that event with songs and plays and parties of all kinds, he would have had a case. But the fact is, the greatest event in human history was not when man set foot on the moon, but rather, when God set foot on the earth. That is the event that sent music through the hearts of angels and shepherds, and through all of history. No human being will ever read all the poetry written about the birth of Jesus. No human being will ever sing all the songs sung about this birth. No human being will ever see all the paintings and other works of art created in honor of this birth.

Paul in IICor. 9:15, calls this baby, God's unspeakable gift. Some translate it God's inestimable gift, or God's indescribable gift, or God's incomparable gift, or God's inexpressible gift. Why all these different words? They illustrate the very point of the verse, which is, there are not enough words to communicate the wonder and the worth of this gift. That is why the Living Bible is good here for it refers to the gift of Jesus as "too wonderful for words."

Harry Ironside had an insight into this word that I treasure. He points out that it literally means, "not yet fully expounded." We have hundreds of thousands of songs, and millions of sermons expounding on Jesus, but the point of Paul is, we can never fully grasp all that we have in Jesus until we see Him face to face. Then we will say, as the Queen of Sheba said after seeing Solomon in person, the half was not told me. We will sing the Praises of God for all eternity for the gift of His Son for we will be ever learning more and more of all that was given to us in this wondrous gift. Because of this gift we will be able to enjoy God forever. Christmas is a time to enjoy God because He made it possible to enjoy Him forever by His inexpressible gift. He will go on forever expounding to us all that is included in this gift. Jesus is a gift that goes on giving and giving for He is infinite.

If I have a party and go to all the trouble to clean, and cook, and decorate, my greatest pleasure is going to be in the enjoyment of my guests. I will get pleasure out of their enjoyment of all I have done for their pleasure. I will enjoy their enjoyment. The same is true for God. What does God get out of Christmas? He gets the pleasure of our enjoyment of what He has done for us. If we love His gift of the Lord Jesus, and we express that love in songs of praise, we fulfill the purpose of God. The greatest gift we can give God is to enjoy

the Gift He has given to us.

Beverly Sills, after one of her performances at the Metropolitan Opera, was being congratulated by those who came back stage. After awhile one of them said they should go and leave her alone for she has to give another performance at eight. Miss Sills heard that and said, "No, I don't have to give another performance. I get to give it! I get to sing!" She so loved to sing that it was pure pleasure and not a duty or obligation. We are really filled with the Christmas spirit when this is our attitude. We don't have to sing Christmas songs, we get to sing them! We get to enjoy the praises of God! We get to enjoy God! The angels made it clear, and the shepherds followed their lead, and wise men and women continue to do so, realizing that the essence of Christmas is in the enjoyment of God.

CHAPTER NINE

9. A SAVIOR IS BORN based on Luke 2:1-20

When I was a shoeshine boy back in Sioux Falls, South Dakota in 1945, I remember being down town when suddenly horns began to blow, bells ring, whistles shriek, and people everywhere in the streets, and stores began to sing, hug, laugh, and shout. Paper began flying from the windows all over town. The good news had come that the war was over. It was a message that brought forth an immediate and enthusiastic response of joy. If you took that same message today and read it from the history book to the people in Sioux Falls, or any other city where the same time happened, they would not respond as they did then. The reason is obvious. It is no longer a message, but only a record of what was a message of good news in the past.

The message of Christmas, however, is so profoundly significant for all time that it can never become a mere record. It is forever a message of good news. It is a continuously contemporary message that is as relevant today as it was when the angels first proclaimed it to the shepherds. Christmas is still the good news that unto you is born a Saviour. It is still a message of hope, joy, and peace that causes men to glorify and praise God. Martin Luther said, "To us it is not simply an old story of an event that happened 1500 years ago, it is more than an event that happened once; for it is a gift and a bestowing that endures forever." This past event is a present experience for every generation. We want to enter into the experience of Christmas again as we examine three aspects of Luke's account of this historic and eternal event. First-

I. THE ADVENT OF THE SAVIOUR. vv.1-7

The first message that comes to us from the record is The Hope of History. The story of Christmas begins with Augustus Caesar. God used a pagan ruler to fulfill His promise to Israel and the world. There would have been no good reason for Joseph and Mary to go to Bethlehem for she was near her time of delivery. It was no time for going on a trip. But in meetings of the Roman government decisions were being made for an enrollment of all the people for tax purposes. Little did these pagan leaders realize they were passing legislation that would fulfill prophecy, and eventually spell doom for their pagan worship. God was using men with no compulsion of their wills, to accomplish His will. This is more than a record of what God did in the past. It is a message to us that we need not fear the future, regardless of who rules in history, for God's ultimate purpose will be accomplished. The

good news of Christmas is God is in control and there is hope in history.

The second message we see in verse 7 is The Hostility of Man. This is symbolized by the statement there was no room in the inn. You would think that with all the providential guidance of God in this whole story, it would have been no problem for God to have seen to it that there was a room available. God could have, but He did not, and this is significant. He did not make everything convenient for His own. Jesus was born into a world where men were hostile to God. Sin had made men basically self-centered and indifferent to the needs of others. God did not arrange that all of this be bypassed for His Son. He came unto His own and His own received Him not.

It would be easy to denounce the inn keeper at this point and hold him guilty for being a hard-hearted, penny pinching scoundrel. There is not the slightest evidence that any of this is true. If the evidence tells us anything about the inn keeper, it tells us that he had compassion on Mary, and even though he had no rooms left, he at least saw that they were not turned away. He made room for them in the stable. It is not likely they were the only travelers that could not find a room. Others were no doubt turned away completely.

The text says there was no room. It does not say they were refused a room, nor does it imply that the inn keeper should have turned someone else out to make room. Joyce Kilmer, in an obviously Catholic poem, even makes a saint of him, "There was a gentle hostler, and blessed be his name! He opened up the stable the night our Lady came. Our Lady and St. Joseph, He gave them food and bed, and Jesus Christ has given him a glory round his head." This is likely going to the opposite extreme, but she certainly has more evidence than those who denounce him.

If we are to see hostility in this statement, it is the hostility of indifference for the individual in the crowd. This is true in every age and it is true today. There are people all about us with needs, but we are all so busy that other things take up all the room, and these needy people are left in the stable of neglect and indifference.

When I worked for a printing company, the employees decided to have a noon Christmas party. Everyone was so busy they forgot to tell George-a lonely unmarried man who worked in the envelope department in the basement. There he sat in that dingy basement looking at envelope cartons as he ate his lunch. Meanwhile, everyone else was having a joyful time in the lunch room. When they realized he had not been invited, many of them felt terrible. If anyone needed to be at that party, it was George. He had the greatest need yet he was left out, not because of evil design, but just neglect. So also, if anyone needed a comfortable room that night in Bethlehem, it was Mary, but the indifferent crowd took no notice.

The message that comes to us from this record is that we ought to wake up and recognize there are always needy people about us who need someone to take notice. The hostility of man in general is due to being too busy to take notice. There is, of course, plenty of the more active type of hostility as that of Herod. He made the birth of Christ an event of sorrow by his killing of the babies in Bethlehem. We have people yet today that celebrate Christmas by going on a drinking spree, and breaking the hearts of their loved ones, and killing people on the highways. The hostility of man towards others is one of the main reasons God sent His Son into the world. He had to endure it, but He also came to cure it, and to bring peace between men as well as reconcile God and man.

The third thing we see here is The Humility Of God. By being born in a barn, as it were, God made it clear that in His decent to man He went all the way. No one can get the impression that the Savior is exclusive. This might have been the case had He been born in a palace. But His humble birth in a manger demonstrates that He is not willing that any

parish, not even the most lowly. Jesus identified Himself with the poorest of men in His birth.

This principle was followed by the Moravian missionaries who even became slaves to reach the slaves with the Gospel. Western Christians have often failed to reach men for Christ because they were not willing to humble themselves to the lowly circumstances of the people they tried to reach. God did so humble Himself, and that is why Christmas is a universal celebration, for all men know God's gift was for them.

I know not how that Bethlehem's Babe
Could in the Godhead be;
I only know the Manger Child
Has brought God's life to me.

This is a present experience for millions because of the advent of the Savior. The second aspect of this account we want to look at is-

II. THE ANNOUNCEMENT OF THE ANGELS. vv.8-14

The first thing the angel said is, "do not be afraid". Because man had sinned and had been cut off from fellowship with God, he lost his sense of comfort being in the presence of the spiritual world. Adam and Eve hid from God in the garden. Ever since, man has been afraid to be in the presence of the supernatural. One of the reasons God seldom sends angels to confront us is because He has no pleasure in scaring the wits out of us.

The angel very quickly got past the fear stage by announcing, "I bring you good news of great joy.." The message of Christmas is not a complex philosophy of how to use cosmic forces to change the world. It is a simple message of joy. It is possible for a Christian to get so caught up in complaining about the abuses of Christmas commercialism that they rob themselves of the joy of the season, and thus become part of the problem, and not part of the solution. We are not to be ever saying, look what the world is coming to, but rather, look what has come to the world. Joy to the world the Lord is come.

General Robert E. Lee did not cease to celebrate Christmas after he lost the Civil War. His wife, Mary Custis Lee, had given birth to two children while he was off fighting, and she seldom saw him on Christmas. The first Christmas after the war was their first together in 38 years without military demands. He had been defeated, he was badly crippled with arthritis, and they had little in the way of earthly goods. There was much to be sad about, but they rejoiced. He said, "I am legally still a prisoner of war but I refuse to feel like a prisoner." Instead, he and his family sang Christmas carols and went to church to praise God for the gift that brings joy regardless of negative circumstances.

God is not opposed to our enjoyment of the things of earth. It is a pleasure for Christians to enjoy the presents of this world. Part of the joy of Christmas is in things.

Come Westinghouse, Philco! Come Hotpoint, G.E.!
Come Sunbeam! Come Mixmaster! Come to the tree!
So much for the wardrobe-how shine Daddy's eyes.
As he reaps his Yule harvest of slippers and ties.

As long as we recognize that the joy of things is fleeting, and not to be depended upon, it can be legitimate. But the lasting source of our joy is the good news that unto us a Saviour is born.

O Brother mine of birth Divine,
Upon this natal day of thine,
Bear with our stress of happiness

Nor count our reverence less,
Because with glee and jubilee,
Our hearts go singing up to thee.

-James Whitcomb Riley.

Joy does not mean a smile from one ear to the other, but a deep sense of being right with God and grateful for His grace. The third aspect we want to look at is-

III. THE ACTION OF THE SHEPHERDS. vv. 15-20

The shepherds were a lower class people who were often wanderers, and often they did not marry. It is of interest that they were the first to be informed of the birth of one who was to be the Great Shepherd, and who also would never marry, but wander from place to place seeking the lost sheep of the house of Israel. God purposely chose the shepherds to convey the truth that He sent His Son for all men. By so doing He also dignifies the common toils of life. God makes no distinction between the sacred and the secular. His good news is not just for the priestly class, but for all classes of men.

When the angels had left the shepherds they went with haste into Bethlehem. Here is the first Christmas rush. It is no problem to be in a hurry if you are going to fulfill the purpose of God. Man is to often in a hurry to get somewhere that does not matter. Johnstone G Patrick said it in poetry, "Along the pathway of stars-we toil toward the moon and Mars. Good God, it seems we've lost our mind in leaving Bethlehem behind." Men are in a hurry to get materials and to get to the moon and Mars, but all too seldom are they in a hurry to get to the manger. That is, their priorities are not on the things of God.

The shepherds worshiped the Christ-child, and then they witnessed to others of what they had seen and heard. The best way to witness is to share your personal experience. If we can share the wonder and joy of what Christmas means to us, because we have received God's gift of a Savior, then we can make Christmas a message, and not merely a record of what God has done. Make this your prayer for this Christmas-

O Jesus! Thou bright Christmas glory,
With Christmas grace upon me shine;
Enlighten me to tell the story
Of all Thy love and work Divine:
So teach me in Thy light to go,
That I with Christmas love may glow.

CHAPTER TEN

10. THE SEASON FOR SEEING based on Luke 2:8-20

Mr. and Mrs. Nudelman were on a 50th wedding anniversary trip to Paris where they visited the Louvre. As they slowly walked past the masterpieces of the ages, Mrs. Nudelman stopped in front of a huge Renaissance painting called, The Child In The Manger. As she stood there, Mr Nudelman asked her why she looked so puzzled. "Don't you know what the scene is about?" "Certainly I know what the scene shows, but I can't figure something out". He asked, "what's to figure out?" She responded, "Here is a family living in a stable with animals, the floor is dirt, covered with straw, and the little baby is almost naked: How could

they afford to have their picture painted?"

People do not see the same thing just because they are looking at the same thing. This is especially true when people look at the nativity scene. A mother was explaining the scene to her young daughter. "See, next to the manger there is a man, and his name is Joseph, and in the manger there is a little baby, the baby Jesus, and the woman in the picture is reaching over to pick up the child. Now who do you think she is?" The girl thought for awhile, and then she said, "the baby-sitter." Everyone is conditioned by their own experience to see different things in the Christmas scene. The eyes play a major role in seeing the details of Christmas.

The shepherds were not sleeping, but were watching their flocks by night, and thus they were wide awake with their eyes searching the darkness for any threat to their sheep. God honored their caring eyes with a sight that has never been equaled. The Angel of the Lord appeared to them, and their first response was that of terror. The radical brightness of God's glory filled them with fear. The angel had to assure them that what they were seeing was not a threat, but a blessing. He told them of a sign to look for; a baby wrapped in cloth and lying in a manger. Their eyes were to be their guide to the gift of God.

Then a great company of angels appeared, filling both their eyes with glory and their ears with praise. Their response was, let's go to Bethlehem and see. Seeing is believing, can be a valid motto, and it was for them, for they had received a message that only the eyes could confirm. They had to see the sign. And when they did, verse 17 says, "Having seen Him they spread the word", and verse 20 says, "They praised God for all they had heard and seen." The shepherds became the first eye-witnesses of the Christmas story.

The story of the wise men follows the same theme. They were not sheep watchers they were star watchers in the night. God also bore witness to them through their eyes. They saw the Star of Bethlehem and knew it was a sign of wonder, and that God had sent a great king into the world. They too followed their eyes to the Christ child, and became part of the Christmas scene, and the first eye-witnesses to the Gentile world.

The point of all of this is, God made the message of Christmas a visual message to appeal to the eyes. Christmas from day one has always been a season for seeing. By His coming into the world Jesus changed how men see reality. He changed how man sees God and history, and how he sees the role of man and the goal of God. In the first stanza of a Christmas hymn, I expressed it this way-

Before Jesus came to earth
God just seemed so far away.
But now because of His birth,
He's here with us on life's way.
Everything is different now,
Since the Lord came into view.
Before Jesus, now we bow,
For He's made everything new.

This is seen in the fact that Christmas is the season of the most radical visual changes in the church and the culture. There is no other time of the year when we decorate the church and see the whole community put up lights, trees and decorations. What is this massive visual change of the environment? It is a witness to the eye-witness nature of the Christmas message.

The message of Christmas is, the invisible God became visible, and the eyes of man beheld Him in the flesh. The love of God became visible in a life that could be seen. The goodness

of God was no longer only a message to the ears, but now it was a message to the eyes of man. Again, I said it in a chorus,

God you just didn't mean maybe
When you said this world you love.
You sent us this Christmas baby
To show us how much you love.

When the shepherds saw the baby, that was the beginning of eye-witness Christianity. The gospel, ever since, has been an appeal to the eyes. Turn your eyes upon Jesus and see who God is; see how much He loves; see the price He pays to save you.

Every light at Christmas; every decoration; every shining piece of paper and plastic is to shout at us, look and see. See the salvation God has given us in the gift of His dear Son. Christmas is a holiday of the eye. It is a season of the sight where seeing is the source of our pleasure and delight.

Let me share with you what I saw for the first time as we approach this Christmas. I saw that I had one more baby than I thought I had. You do to. Jesus was born as the universal baby. Whose baby was Jesus? Was He God's baby, Joseph baby, Mary's baby? Yes He was all of those, but the Bible stresses that Jesus was born to the people He came to seek and to save. The angel said to the shepherds, "A Savior has been born to you." Not, a Saviour has been born to Mary and Joseph, the baby is born to you. This is the same kind of language we see in the prophecy of Isaiah 9:6, "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on His shoulders. And He will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."

The message of Christmas is not that God so loved Mary and Joseph that He gave them a wondrous baby. Not even, God so loved Israel, He gave them a wondrous baby. The message is, God so loved the world He gave the whole world a wondrous baby. The Christ child is everybody's child.

There are no childless people in this world for everyone has one child born to them, the baby of Bethlehem. Do men have a baby born to them? Yes! Do singles have a baby born to them? Yes! Everybody that God loves has had this baby born to them, and God loves the whole world. You can't go to anyone on this planet and say Jesus was not born to you. He was born to all and He died for all for He is God's gift to all. I thought I only had three babies but now I see I have four. Jesus not only died for me, He was born for me so that I might through Him be a part of God's family. Everyone who accepts this gift of the Christmas baby is part of the family of God. Our new birth as babes in God's kingdom depends upon our receiving the babe of Bethlehem as our baby, born to us as our Savior. If men do not take God's child as theirs, He will not take them as His child. The gift has to be both given and received for the circle of love to be completed. We must receive God's Son to be received as God's sons. John 1:12 says, "...To all who received Him, to those who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God."

Christmas is a celebration of the birthday of Jesus, but also our own, for the two are directly connected. Our birthday into the kingdom of God is directly related to our acceptance of the gift of God, the babe of Bethlehem. The celebration of His birthday is our acknowledgment that we too have a new birthday to celebrate because of Him. If He was never born to us we could never be born again into the family of God. Christmas is the celebration of His birth to us and our birth to Him.

I had not seen the Gospel in this unique way before. Like most, I saw Jesus as my Savior from the point of view of the end of His life. But now He can be seen as Savior from the

beginning of His life. The shepherds and the wise men were likely dead by the time Jesus went to the cross, but He was their Savior for He was born a Savior. E. H. Divall expressed this in poetry,

God gave this gift to me-
Mine own to be!
Lo, all my days
Henceforward shall be spent in living praise;
My life-my lips forever shall proclaim
His holy name.

He gave this gift to me-
Mine own to be;
And I, with faith no longer cold and dim
Lift up mine eyes to look on Him
Before whom angels fall
And see in Him my all in all.

The Christmas Gospel is not complete without the death and resurrection, but anyone who receives the babe of Bethlehem as their gift from God, accepts all that He did in life and death as part as that gift. The baby is our Savior because of what He grew up to do for us.

This gift of baby Jesus was a physical gift. It was one that could be seen and heard and touched. God's gift was a gift to the senses. He was Immanuel-God with us. Not just God for us, God above us, or God around us, but God with us-as visible light. In John 1:9, we read these amazing words, "The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world." Jesus gives everyone the light they need to see God's love and become a child of God by receiving Him. The Christmas message is a visible message. It is light that can be seen. Wise men who are looking still see it. There will be no one in history who wants to be a child of God who will not see the light who leads them to Christ. He is not the light of Israel only, or the light of the church only, He is the light of the world.

This should first of all make us stop complaining about all the massive decorating and lighting the world does. You can't get too extravagant in celebrating the Savior of the world. The world does not know it of course and decorates for it's own pleasure and profit. But for those of us who know the gift of God, the luxurious decorations are very appropriate signs of Him who came to give us life abundant and life eternal.

It is the season for seeing, and we are to see in all the lights and colors signs that point us to the gift of God. A gift is a visual word. It says to the receiver- I love you. Win Couchman, a female Bible teacher, tells of how a visible gift can say these words.

One Christmas Eve her three children had symptoms of the flu. She had to call her parents and tell them they could not come for Christmas. It was a sad night and it took her a long time to get to sleep. But early on Christmas morning she heard her father's truck pull up in the yard. He had decided to bring Christmas to them. He had packages and food, and to her surprise he had cut off the top of their Christmas tree with the star on it and brought that along too. She cried with joy when she saw that visible expression of her father's love and she wrote, "Oh, how like God my father was that Christmas morning. Our heavenly Father took His dearest treasure, His star, His only begotten and entirely beloved Son, and sent Him to us. The Son consented because He loved us and knew our great need. Heaven went without it's chief ornament while He came to be born and live and die on earth."

If you look there are visible signs everywhere in this season of seeing. W. M. Martin is a

collector of stamps who specializes in Christmas stamps. The first ones to be issued in the early 1930's are with a Christmas rose or poinsettia. Then in 1939 Brazil issued one with the three wise men and Star of Bethlehem. When the U.S. came out with its first Christmas stamp in 1962, this popularized it and many nations followed. Today there are so many countries that issue Christmas stamps, you can make it a hobby just to keep up on this specialized area of collecting. My point is not to encourage stamp collecting, but to point out just how visible the Christmas holiday is. It is depicted in the visible world of stamps as no other event in history is.

The history of Christmas cards started earlier, back in the middle of the 1800's. At first they were pretty but neutral. Flowers and other nature scenes were common. Then they became more Biblical with the nativity scene. By 1880 the Christmas card exploded into a fad. Louis Prang, a German immigrant, became the father of the American Christmas card.

He started to offer prizes of up to \$2000 for the best art. This tempted even well known painters to submit their art. By 1882, Prang was selling over five million cards in America. Today there are hundreds of millions sold. There is no other event in history that motivates such a visual depiction of it. The Christmas scenes have been painted and printed to be seen by more eyes than any other event. Christmas was God's saying, see-see how much I love you, see my nature, glory and my love. Ever since, seeing is the essence of Christmas.

The first Christmas was seen only by a few. God put just one great star in the sky, and it was apparently visible only to the Magi. The angels that lit up the fields were only seen by the shepherds. Caesar, the Roman senate, and the people of the Empire saw no hint that history was changed by the birth of one tiny baby in Bethlehem. But today because of the impact of that baby on history there is no way to escape the visible changes that announce the celebration of His birth.

This is the season of buying and giving of presents, and even this is symbolic of the Incarnation. All through history God had given His people love, guidance, mercy and a host of invisible gifts. But at Christmas God gave His most visible gift. We celebrate this gift by giving visible gifts to all whom we love. These gifts are all the more conspicuous by being wrapped in special paper with ribbons. We make it the most visible expression of our love that we can, because we are celebrating God's most visible expression of His love.

There is no other time of the year that we have to rearrange our homes so as to fit a tree into it. This is a radical visible change. We do this radical thing because this is a conspicuous way to make Christmas a visible celebration. It is hard not to notice a tree in the living room. Then we put brightly wrapped presents beneath it and beautiful lights on it. The tree becomes a focus of our attention. This is not good if you idolize the tree, but if you see it as a symbol of God's heart, evergreen with life-giving love expressed in visible gifts, it can help keep you stay Christ-centered at Christmas.

The Christmas tree was originally the present-bearer. It represented the source of all gifts, and the gifts were hung on the tree rather than placed under it. In 1836 this custom was described, "The sturdiest branch drooped with its burden of books, chessmen, puzzles, etc., for Julius, a stripling of 13; dolls, birds, beasts, and boxes were hung on the lesser limbs. A regiment of soldiers had alighted on one bough, and Noah's ark was anchored to another, and to all the slender branches were attached cherries, plums, strawberries and fine peaches, as tempting and at least as sweet as the fruits of paradise."

Let us not be as those who have eyes but do not see. Let us in this season of seeing, see everything around us as symbols of the visible gift of God in the babe of Bethlehem. Let every light you see make you thank God for the light of the world. Let every Christmas tree

you see make you thank God for the Son of God who died on the tree to give you life that is evergreen-that is, eternal. Let every present you see make you thank God for His Present. Let every color you see make you thank God for the color and the festive atmosphere that will be ours forever in the New Jerusalem, because of His Gift. Let your eye gate be ever open to take in this message, and be filled with the light of His love. Let this be your prayer-

Lord I want to hear you say to me
I gave my best for you to see.
Look around and look above,
In every light see my love.
Let lights of earth and lights of heaven
Remind you of the Light I've given.
In every tree and decoration
See the glory of my salvation.
In every gift you will receive
See my Gift-in Him believe.
Let this truth fill your whole being,
Christmas is the Season for Seeing.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

11. THE SIGHTS OF CHRISTMAS based on Luke 2:8-20

Hal Bowser said, "the most exciting gift I've ever received was the microscope my parents gave me for Christmas when I was eleven." The first thing he did on that Christmas day was to go out in the back yard and get some water from a rain puddle. He put a drop under his microscope and what he saw changed his whole life. He saw creatures he never knew existed and a world filled with life beyond his wildest dreams. He realized that microscopy opened up whole new worlds of color and creativity. No longer would even slimy ditch water be contemptible to him, for everywhere, there was fascinating beauty and life.

When he grew up he joined the New York Microscopical Society and began to meet large numbers of micromaniacs. People all over the world study animal, mineral and vegetable phenomenon invisible to the naked eye and see wonders most people never see. There are people every day who see things God has made in this world that the rest of the world does not see.

This was a major characteristic of the first Christmas as well. It was a time of seeing the invisible world. The most advanced technology in electronic microscopes could not have enabled man to see what was seen on that first Christmas. All the main characters of the Christmas story were allowed to see the world of the invisible.

Mary was permitted to see the angel Gabriel who came to announce that she was to give birth to the Messiah. Only three people in all of history saw this divine messenger who stands in the presence of God-Daniel, Mary and Zechariah.

Joseph was given a vision by which he was able to see Mary was not unfaithful but was with child by the Holy Spirit. What he saw in that vision made him a cooperative companion

with Mary in the ordeal of the Incarnation.

The wise men would never have been a part of the Christmas story had God not revealed to them the Star of Bethlehem. This was clearly a supernatural sight not visible to all the world but only to these specialists who were gazing at the heavens for signs. Such a sight would bring people from everywhere if they could have seen it. But it was only the few who could see this star of wonder.

The shepherds had their own unique supernatural vision. The angel of the Lord appeared to them and the field lit up with the glory of the Lord. The wise men never got to see these glorious beings. And the shepherds never saw the star. Mary and Joseph did not apparently see either sight. God gave each person and each group of persons the kind of vision they needed to motivate them to do what He willed.

The one vision they all had in common was the most marvelous vision of all: they all saw the Word who had become flesh. They all saw the invisible become visible. The Son who reigned with God in the invisible realm of the Spirit, where the eyes of man cannot penetrate, was now visible in that babe of Bethlehem. They were seeing the greatest miracle of all history and the wonder of the ages that makes all other miracles pale in comparison. This was the eye-witness event of all time and it changed all of time.

The birth of the Son of God has given us the most eye appealing holiday of the year. Christmas is a seeing experience. The response of the shepherds has become the universal response at Christmas-let's go see! They could not wait to go see the Christ child. The wise men could not rest until they saw the Christ child. The desire to see the Gift of God is the strongest desire we see motivating the people on that first Christmas.

The eye gate is still the main gate to the Christmas experience. It is the season for seeing. Let's go see Santa; let's go see the decorations; let's go see the lights; let's go see the Christmas play; etc. the whole nation is caught up in a seeing frenzy at Christmas. Seeing is what gets us in the mood. We put up the tree and get out the decorations to change the whole atmosphere. We do it because seeing is the essence of the season.

When the word became flesh and we beheld the glory of God in visible form, that changed everything. We see God in a new light and all of life is seen from a new perspective. Changing the whole atmosphere in which we live is a valid symbol of the significance of what God did by letting his invisible nature become visible in Jesus Christ. Decorating is a visible expression of invisible values.

We need to be aware that seeing is also used by Satan to lead us astray. All the wonders and beauty we see at Christmas need to be used in a conscious way to remind us of the wonder of what God has done in Christ. If we let all the beauty of the season distract us from Jesus we are falling into the same trap Adam and Eve fell into. God gave them an environment of unmatched beauty pleasing to the eye. Gen. 2:9 says, "God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground-trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food." They had beauty beyond our comprehension. But the forbidden fruit was also beautiful and they were led astray by its beauty. So it is with the beauty of Christmas. It is valid to enjoy it but it is dangerous to be so involved that we take our eyes off the best-the Gift of God.

I was impressed as I read Dale Evans Rogers book, Christmas Is Always and Pat Boone's book, The Real Christmas. Both of these well known Christian entertainers are pro-Santa Claus. That is, they saw in this jolly old St. Nick, that which led them to appreciate the Lord Jesus. They were seeing this secular symbol as a potential sacred symbol.

Many Christians feel Santa is a mere secular symbol and a myth, but these two popular Christians see more. They argue that if you know the history of Santa you will see the more

that they see. Dale Rogers takes us back to Asia Minor where all the churches that Jesus spoke to in the book of Rev. were located. In the fourth century a rich merchant lived there who had no children. He and his wife prayed that if God would give them a boy they would train that child to love and serve Him. When God answered that prayer they named the boy Nicholas. He was lovingly nurtured and well educated in the Christian faith.

His parents died when he was quite young and left him a lot of money. But he was generous and gave most of it away. He kept three bags of gold that would keep him nicely for the rest of his life. But he had compassion on poor girls that had no dowry to get married and he gave the three bags to three poor girls so they could marry.

He decided to become a priest and after he finished his studies he went back to his home town of Myra in Greece. The town was in a state of turmoil. The Bishop had just died and the clergy could not agree on who should take over. They decided the next priest to come in to the Cathedral would become the Bishop. By the providence of God, Nicholas was that man and was proclaimed the new Bishop of Myra. He became known as the patron of the children because of his untiring efforts to teach them. On his birthday, which was Dec.6th, he collected presents to give to the children of Myra. This became a tradition all over Europe and was done in the memory of St. Nicholas. After many years the gift giving was shifted to Christmas gift giving.

Santa Claus is the Dutch name of St. Nicholas and the Dutch brought the tradition to America. The Dutch were really into St. Nicholas and by the 13th century they had 23 St. Nicholas churches. They brought him to America, to New York, and now he has become a tradition in our culture. All kinds of mythology has grown around him with his elves and reindeer etc., but the fact is he had a Christian origin and if you see this you can see through all the myth to a symbol of a Christlike Spirit. Pat Boone writes, "Surely Santa, as he should be, as little children see him, a spirit of love, of generosity, of merriment, would have delighted the heart of the Christ child."

I share this to illustrate that people see different things even when they are looking at the same thing. Many look at Santa and see only a secular myth and they are turned off. Others look at Santa and see a symbol of the Christlike spirit and they are turned on to praise Christ for his coming and his impact on all of history.

What you see in the sights of Christmas all depends on what you desire to see. I have to fight the scrooge in me when I see the massive Christmas decorations in a mall, for example. I can see all the money going into them as a waste. This money could be given to feed the poor. I can see only the extravagance of it all and not realize I am being just like the disciples who criticized Mary for wasting her perfume on anointing Jesus. They saw only waste but Jesus saw love and honor in her act. So I need to look at the expensive decorations as a tribute to the King of Kings. That is not necessarily the motive of those paying for all the decorations. It is more likely pride and competition and greed, but the point is I have to choose what I will see. Will I see the negative and be a complainer or will I choose to see the positive and be a praiser? All the sights of Christmas present you with a choice.

The wise men saw in the Star of Bethlehem the symbol of the coming King and they were moved to search for Him to worship Him. Herod when he heard of it saw that star as a threat and he searched for the King to eliminate Him. What you see is what you get and you choose what you see. The wise men choose to see in the star, a good thing. Herod choose to see a bad thing. The fact was the King that star revealed was Herod's Saviour too. He could have chosen to be the first to honor the Gift of God with a feast of celebration. But he choose to see the King as competition and to seek His destruction. He had a choice but he

chose to see the negative.

Norman Vincent Peale, the father of positive thinking, had to learn from his father that positive thinking is a choice. You have to choose what you see. Listen to his testimony-

One Christmas Eve when I was twelve, I was out with my minister father doing some late Christmas shopping. We were both loaded down with packages and I was getting tired of it and a bit cross. I was thinking how good it would be to get home, when a beggar-a bleary-eyed, unshaven, dirty old man-came up to me, touched my arm with a hand like a claw, and asked for money. He was so repulsive that instinctively I recoiled. Softly my father said, "Norman, it's Christmas Eve. You shouldn't treat a man that way."

I was unrepentant. "Dad," I complained, "he's nothing but a bum "

My father spoke strongly. "Maybe he hasn't made much of himself, but he's still a child of God." He then handed me a dollar-a lot of money for those days and certainly for a preacher's income. "I want you to take this and give it to that man," he said. "Speak to him respectfully. Tell him you are giving it to him in Christ's name."

"Oh, Dad," I protested, "I can't do anything like that."

My father's voice was firm. "Go and do as I tell you."

So, reluctant and resisting, I ran after the old man and said, "Excuse me, sir. I give you this money in the name of Christ."

He stared at the dollar bill, then looked at me in utter amazement. A wonderful smile came to his face, a smile so full of life and beauty that I forgot that he was dirty and unshaven. I forgot that he was ragged and old. With a gesture that was almost courtly, he took off his hat. Graciously he said, "And I thank you, young sir, in the name of Christ."

All my irritation, all my annoyance faded away. The street, the houses, everything around me suddenly seemed beautiful because I had been part of a miracle that I have seen many times since-the transformation that comes over people when you think of them as children of God, when you offer them love in the name of a Baby born two thousand years ago in a stable in Bethlehem, a Person who still lives and walks with us and makes His presence known.

That was my Christmas discovery that year-the gold of human dignity that lies hidden in every living soul, waiting to shine through if only we'll give it a chance. Early in life I began to understand that the positive

**principle is deeply part of loving human relationships,
and for that insight I am very grateful.**

Because Peale learned you can choose how to see people, he choose to see them as children of God. He became an encourager because he choose to see in all people the potential of being channels of God love. The sight he saw that Christmas made him a wise man. The light of the world has come and what do you do with light? You see it and you see by it. Let us, like him, choose to see the positive by that light.

The challenge for all of us is to go into this Christmas season determined to see in the sights of Christmas that which makes us praise God and want to be part of His light in this dark world. Let your prayer be, open my eyes Lord, I want to see Jesus. The gifts of God are everywhere if we will only choose to see.

**There are some that don't open their eyes or their ears or their
hearts
And they still say, that's not quite enough.
They wander through the stores looking for Christmas;
But others open their whole being to the Lord,
Bending their knees to praise God,
Carrying Christmas with them every day.
For these the whole world is a gift.**

It does no ultimate good for man to see the far reaching galaxies or the nearly infinite microscopic creatures God has created if they fail to see in the sights of Christmas the wonder of God's love. When the lights and beautiful colors and the music make you praise God for the gift of His Son, then you are seeing with the eyes of faith.

Malcomb Muggeridge, the distinguished international journalist from England, who became a Christian, tells of being in Bethlehem to make a film. He was turned off by all the commercialism, especially in the Church of the Nativity where beggars and children were offering postcards and souvenirs for sale. He wrote, " How ridiculous these so-called 'shrines' were! I was thinking to myself. How squalid the commercialism which exploited them! Who but a credulous fool could possibly suppose that the place marked in the crypt with a silver cross was veritably the precise spot where Jesus had been born? The Holy Land, as it seemed to me, had been turned into a sort of Jesusland, on the lines of Disneyland."

But then he took his eyes off the commercialism and began to observe the faces of those visitors coming into the crypt. He saw faces transformed by being where the Word became flesh. People were not debating whether or not this was the actual spot where Jesus was born. They were not complaining about the junk being sold. They were in a state of awe because they saw beyond all that man was doing there to all that God did there. They were seeing the invisible and Muggeridge said, once more the glory of the Lord shown around, and he too sensed the presence of the Saviour.

In the very spot where Christmas began, he had to choose what he would see in that setting. Would he see the secular of man's folly and greed or would he see the sacred of God's awesome love and presence?

We all have to choose what we see everywhere for in this fallen world the darkness of sin and the light of salvation are always both present everywhere. We have to choose where we

focus and the challenge of Christmas is to see the love and the glory of Christ in all the sights of Christmas.

CHAPTER TWELVE

12. CHRISTMAS SILENCE AND SONG based on Luke 2:8-20

Paradox is simply the recognition that opposites can both be true. The Christmas story is loaded with paradoxes. The most profound revolving around the Christ-Child Himself: The eternal Son born into time and the Infinite Spirit embodied in finite flesh. The creator of all space having no room in the inn; the invisible made visible; the perfect made incomplete and the limitless made limited.

The list goes on and on even to the most minor details like the paradox of that first Christmas being both a night of silence and a night of song. If you read through the Christmas hymns in a hymnal you will see these two themes stand out often, some with a focus on the silence and others with a focus on the song. For example, O Little Town Of Bethlehem, specializes in silence. "O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie. Above thy deep and dream-less sleep the silent stars go by." The third stanza goes, "How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given! So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of His heaven." Then there is, of course, the most famous of all, "Silent night, holy night, all is calm all is bright. Round yon virgin mother and child, holy infant so tender and mild, sleep in heavenly peace, sleep in heavenly peace."

The other focus which is on sound, shatters the silence of that holy night with loud songs of jubilant joy. You have for example, Joy To The World, where the heavens and nature sing. You have, Angels We Have Heard On High, sweetly singing o'er the plains and Hark, The Herald Angels Sing, and in Come All Ye Faithful, the second stanza, "Sing, choirs of angels, sing in exaltation, o sing all ye citizens of heaven above."

This duel focus on both the silence and the sounds of Christmas should clue us in to the duel nature of Christmas. It is a day and a season for both contemplation and celebration. It is a time for both reflecting and rejoicing. It is, in other words, a season that is meant to have an impact on both our minds and our emotions; Our thinking and our feeling. Let's focus first on-

I. CONTEMPLATION.

This simply means to meditate, think about, study spiritual things. This was the focus of Mary on that first Christmas. In the midst of high emotions with the angels and the shepherds making a lot of noise about the birth of Jesus, verse 19 tells us, "but Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart." She represents the quiet and thoughtful side of Christmas.

Mary was not in on the anthem of the angels. She did not hear all heaven ring as the angels sing. The focus of Mary was on the baby in her arms and all the implications of being a mother to the Messiah. If the challenge of parenting makes you worrisome at times, imagine how Mary must have felt. The wheels in her mind were turning rapidly as she wondered, what now? How do I enter into what God is doing in the greatest event of all

history-the Incarnation? This calls for contemplation and not just celebration.

It takes some profound thinking on the part of all us to make the coming of God into history relevant to our purpose for living. Much of the meaning of Christmas is wrapped up in the way God came into this world. An unknown author wrote,

"Christ could have come riding on a rainbow,
the winds driving His chariot, the Milky Way
serving Him as a heavenly boulevard, while the
glittering stars like so many jewels clustered around
Him. He could have advanced upon this world with
great pageantry, accompanied by innumerable
bands of trumpeting angels, with bright, shining
cherubim His attendants, so that every eye would
have seen His true glory.

"But instead he choose to arrive on this planet
almost unobserved. Silently, wrapped in the swad-
dling clothes of humility, He willingly shared the
poverty of a humble family, content to be cradled
in the foul-smelling stable of a little obscure town
called Bethlehem! He stooped so low that He might
reach us in our depravity, lift us out of the mire of
sin, and set our feet on the heavenly pathway. What
condescension, bringing us redemption!

The song writer says, 'Out of the ivory pal-
aces, into a world of woe, only His great eternal
love made my Savior go.'

Paul in Phil. 2 says this is to be the Christian attitude in life. We are to contemplate on the condescension of Christ and do likewise by forsaking selfishness and striving to focus on the needs and interests of others. We are to be little Christs trying to demonstrate anew to the world what Jesus did for the world on that first Christmas. This means we are to have the spirit of Christmas all year long.

What is the spirit of Christmas? It is a host of things but we want to focus on what Paul says in Titus 3:4 where he writes, "when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us...." The Christmas spirit is the spirit of kindness. The coming of Christ was the appearing of God's kindness. Everyone of the characters in the nativity scene were characterized by kindness. If it was not for Herod, every person in the entire Christmas story would be characterized by kindness. He alone was mean and cruel.

The Innkeeper gets a bad rap for he is often portrayed as being mean. It is mere negative speculation that he turned away the holy family. The positive speculation has more evidence. The manger was likely connected with the inn and they could not have settled in there unless the Innkeeper had said, "there is no room in the inn but we can't let you go off with no place for the night. Let me show you to the stable where you will at least be warm." It is likely the Innkeeper was hospitable and kind. It is likely in that every other person in that scene was kind. The shepherds and the wise men came in the spirit of kindness. The wise men even brought gifts that Mary and Joseph needed for their time of exile in Egypt.

The angels were kind enough to share the good news of Christ's birth with the lowly

shepherds. The spirit of kindness covers all the Christmas characters like a garment. This spirit has been picked up by the tribesmen of Liberia and a missionary has translated their concept of Christmas as follows-

Whoever on the night of the
Celebration of the Birth of Christ
Carries warm water and a sleeping mat

To a weary stranger,
Provides wood from his own fire

For a helpless neighbor,
Takes medicine to one

Sick with malaria,
Gives food to children

Who are thin and hungry,
Provides a torch for a traveler

In the dark forest,
Visits a timid friend

Who would like to know about Christ,

Whoever does these things

Will receive gifts of happiness

Greater than that of welcoming a son

Returning after a long absence,

And though he live to be so old

That he must be helped into his hammock,

And though his family and friends all die

So that he stands as a trunk stripped of branches,

Yet life will be sweet for him,

And he will have peace,

As one whose rice harvest is great,

And who hears his neighbors

Praise the exploits of his youth.

So will you receive happiness

If you do these acts of love and service

On the night of the celebration of Christmas,

The Birth of' Christ.

Kindness reveals that Jesus is still present in this world through His body the church. When the head was born the body was born too. Some feel the church was born on Pentecost but that is when it was spirit-filled. The church was born with the Head on Christmas. When the head of the baby makes it out of the birth canal the body is not far behind and so it was with the body of Christ. Jesus had followers the day of His birth. Joseph and Mary of course, but the shepherds worshipped Him and went immediately to proclaim to others the good news.

The coming of Jesus was the coming of the First Comforter. Later at Pentecost He sent another Comforter but Jesus was the first. What does a Comforter do? He comforts by acts and words of kindness. He cheers you up and gives you hope. This is the challenge of the contemplative side of Christmas. How can I be a channel of God's kindness so the world can see Christ is still active in history? Keeping Christ in Christmas means to keep on doing today what God was doing on that first Christmas in showing kindness to a world that

deserved judgement by providing a way to peace with Him and a way to eternal hope. This calls for contemplation on our part as we seek to have the mind of Christ in relating to the world with a spirit of kindness. Now lets look at-

II. CELEBRATION

To the shepherds, that first Christmas was a night of unmatched sound of celebration. It was calm and quiet up to the point when the angel of the Lord appeared and frightened the wits out of them. They no doubt heard their hearts pounding when the glory of the Lord shown around them. As far as the record shows, they were the only people in biblical history who got to hear the angels sing on earth. John was caught up to hear them sing in heaven but I am not aware of anyone else who ever heard them sing on earth. The prophet Isaiah had a vision in which he says in Isaiah 6, that the angels above the throne of God were calling to one another, " holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty, the whole earth is full of His glory." He heard them while he was on earth but the angels were in heaven. Only at Christmas did the angels sing on earth in great celebration.

From that point on it was more like a New Years Eve celebration for the shepherds. It is now a new era not just a new year. The turning point of history has come and nothing can ever be the same. When they went to the manger and confirmed the angelic message verse 20 says, "the shepherds returned glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told." In contrast to Mary who sat quietly thinking about all that had happened, they were on an emotional high, shouting and praising God and adding to the joyful sounds that filled the air that Christmas.

Their personal lives had not changed that much. They were still lowly shepherds who had to watch sheep the rest of their lives. They were still the lower class of society with fewer rights than other people. They did not receive a change of status or get angels coming to them each night to provide music and entertainment in their lonely jobs.

What did they get out of that first Christmas that made them celebrate? They got a glimpse into the future that gave them hope. God is at work in this world and His will will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Heaven has come down to earth in this baby and now all history will be different. There will be a new focus in history for this baby will do something which makes God's plan of salvation the primary focus. The shepherds were not just celebrating because of their good fortune of being chosen to receive this revelation. They were not just celebrating being among the few in all of history to hear the angels sing. They were celebrating because now history was filled with hope. The message of Christmas is good news for all people. Their hearts were expanded for they knew they were in on a secret that would bless the entire human race.

In contrast listen to these lines from Dr. Seuss's *How The Grinch Stole Christmas*,
The Grinch hated Christmas! The whole Christmas season!
Now, please don't ask the reason. No one quite knows the reason.
It could be his head wasn't screwed on just right.
It could be, perhaps, that his shoes were too tight.
But I think the most likely reason of all
May have been that his heart was two sizes too small.

That is the problem with all who cannot or do not celebrate Christmas. Herod was one of these. He could not get his heart to expand beyond himself and accept the gift of God. He was locked into a world where all that mattered was his own ambitions. It takes a big heart to see the big picture. The angels had enormous size hearts, for they knew all the negatives and yet they were celebrating.

How could these beings who knew that Jesus would be rejected, in spite of His perfection, be singing? They knew He would not call for their intervention to save Him from the cross, yet they called His birth good news of great joy. It is because they see the end result is that man will at last have a champion and a hero who can reverse the curse and open the door of hope, so men can be saved and join them in everlasting praise.

The shepherds had large hearts as well and as soon as they saw the Christ child they joined the angels in glorifying and praising God. For all with large enough hearts Christmas is a celebration. The New Testament has a special vocabulary for those whose hearts are big enough to see beyond the sin and folly of man to the gift of life in Jesus. The major words are bless, thank, worship, glorify, honor, magnify, extol, rejoice in, sing to, and declare the mighty works of God. All of these are to be a part of Christmas for it is the celebration of the greatest Gift ever given.

Ann Weems has written a poem that expresses what Christians ought to feel about the celebration of Christmas.

Each year about this time I try to be sophisticated
And pretend I understand the bored expressions
Relating to the "Christmas spirit."
I nod when they say "Put the Christ back in Christmas."
I say yes, yes, when they shout "Commercial" and
"Hectic, hectic, hectic."
After all, I'm getting older,
And I've heard it said, "Christmas is for children."
But somehow a fa-la-la keeps creeping out . . .
So I'll say it:
I love Christmas tinsel
And angel voices that come from the beds upstairs.
And I say three cheers for Santa Claus
And the Salvation Army bucket
And all the wrappings and festivities and special warm feelings.
I say it is good
Giving,
Praising,
Celebrating.
So hooray for Christmas trees
And candlelight
And the good old church pageant.
Hooray for shepherd boys who forget their lines
And wise men whose beards fall off
And a Mary who giggles.
O Lord, you were born!

O Lord, you were born!
And that breaks in upon my ordered life like bugles blaring,
And I sing "Hark, the Herald Angels" in the most unlikely places.
You were born
And I will celebrate!

**I rejoice for the carnival of Christmas!
I clap for the pajama-clad cherubs
And the Christmas cards jammed in the mail slot.
I o-o-o-oh for the turkey
And ah-h-h-h for the Christmas pudding
And thank God for the alleluias I see in the faces of people
I don't know
And yet know very well.**

**O Lord, there just aren't enough choir boys to sing what I feel.
There aren't enough trumpets to blow.
O Lord, I want bells to peal!
I want to dance in the streets of Bethlehem!
I want to sing with the heavenly host!
For unto us a Son was given
And he was called God With Us.
For those of us who believe,
The whole world is decorated in love!**

May God help us all to get involved mentally and emotionally with the Christmas message. Let the silence of Christmas motivate us to contemplation on how we can be channels of God's kindness. Let the song of Christmas motivate us to celebration. Let us make some joyful noise in praise to God for the gift of His Son. Let's get in on the best of both worlds-Christmas silence and Christmas song.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

13. CHRISTMAS STUFF based on Luke 2:1-20

Back in October of 1948, a young pastor and his wife took on the challenge of repairing and restoring an old church. Their goal was to have it done by Christmas Eve. But just two days before Christmas a storm dumped over an inch of rain, and the roof leaked, and right in front of the church the plaster got soaked and crumbled leaving a gaping hole in the wall.

The pastor and his wife were discouraged, and all their efforts seemed to be in vain. They were really down as they went to a benefit auction for the youth that afternoon. One of the items put up for bid was an old ivory and gold colored tablecloth. It was nearly 15 feet long. The pastor got an idea and he bid until he got it. He took it to the church where he used it to cover the wall where the hole was.

The day before Christmas he noticed a woman standing at the bus stop by the church. He knew the bus would not be coming for at least a half an hour and it was cold. So he invited her to come into the church to keep warm. He learned she was not from that neighborhood, but was in the area to interview for a job as a governess, but she had not gotten it. When she saw the cloth on the front of the church she rushed up to it and said, "this is my banquet cloth." She told the shocked pastor its history and even showed him her initials she had embroidered in one corner.

She and her husband had lived in Vienna, Austria. They had to flee from the Nazis before

World War II. They went separately so as not to be conspicuous, for they were opposed to Hitler. They never found each other again, and she heard that he had died in a concentration camp. The pastor was touched and he offered her the cloth. But she had no need for it now, and liked the fact that it was doing some good right where it was. She left the church and her cloth, and the pastor thought he would never see her again.

In the candle light of the Christmas Eve service, the tablecloth looked even more magnificent. The lovely lace was so pretty in the flickering light of the candles as the golden thread woven through it stood out. As the people left the church they commented on the attractiveness of the church. One older gentleman lingered and admired the tablecloth. He said to pastor as he was about to leave, " It's strange-many years ago my wife and I owned such a tablecloth. She used it on special occasions when we lived in Vienna."

Goose bumps raised rapidly on the pastor's skin, as he told him about his experience with a woman in the church that very afternoon. The old man began to cry. "Can it be that she is alive? How can I find her?" The pastor remembered the name of the family she had visited to get a job. He called there and got her address. Together they went to the home and he witnessed a reunion like he had never seen in his life. They had been separated for over a decade, each thinking the other was dead. Now because of a common possession, they were reunited, and able to celebrate Christmas with great joy.

History is filled with stories like this where mere commonplace things play a major role. The experience of one pastor is repeated, I am sure, by millions every year. Coming into church one Christmas morning, he asked a little boy what he got for Christmas. His face lit up as he replied, "I got a whole lot of stuff." Stuff is a rather vague term. The dictionary says it means any kind of matter whether solid, liquid, or gas. It covers the entire universe of material things, and believe it or not, it is a Biblical word. In the King James Version it is used 13 times in the Old Testament, and once in the New Testament. It is used to refer to all of one's household possessions. It is used to refer to all the equipment, weapons, and baggage of an army. Stuff covers all kinds of stuff. Anything that is not in the animal kingdom is included in the term stuff.

Shakespeare who wrote at the same time that the King James Version was translated used the word stuff more than all other authors in history. One of his most famous lines is, "We are such stuff as dreams are made of." Benjamin Franklin is famous for his line, "Do not squander time for that is the stuff life is made of." When we come to the Biblical account of the birth of Jesus we discover that by becoming a man he entered into a relationship with the world of stuff.

There is not a lot of the mineral kingdom referred to in the Christmas story, but the few there are, are major items. The star above and the gold below that the wise men brought are of the mineral kingdom. One example each of heavenly and earthly stuff. Jesus identified with these things by taking on such names as, The Bright And Morning Star, and The Star of Jacob. And for valuable earthly matter he is called The Pearl Of Great Price. Other mineral names of Jesus are Rock Of Ages and Stone of Stumbling.

The vegetable kingdom is referred to more often. In our text, here in Luke 2, the manger is mentioned three times. Then there is the frankincense and myrrh the wise men brought, and the house the holy family lived in when they came. Wood stands out as the dominate stuff in the Christmas story. Even the decree of Caesar was likely made from the plant kingdom. The only other thing connected with our Lord's birth was the cloth He was wrapped in, and that could have been from either the plant or animal kingdom. The point of all this is that Jesus came into a world of stuff. Jesus acknowledged the value of all this stuff

by taking on Himself names relating to the vegetable kingdom.

Root of Jesse

Root out of Dry Ground

The First Fruit

Rose of Sharon

Lily of the Valley

The Plant of Renown

The Apple Tree

The Vine

The Bread of Life

The Tree of Life

Jesus created all of the stuff of this material universe, and in His Incarnation He became personally involved with the animal, mineral, and vegetable kingdom. His goal is to redeem all of His creation from the effects of the fall, so that even stuff is a part of the plan of salvation.

Stuff is sort of a crude word, but then, so is the Christmas setting. The stable was not the equivalent of a modern delivery room. The stable had stuff that was not all pleasant, and could have made Mary and Joseph wish they had some frankincense perfume at that time, and not later when the wise men came.

The stuff that stands out most is wood. The manger is mentioned three times. In His birth, this future carpenter was surrounded by wood put together by another carpenter, and selected by His supposed father, Joseph, as being the safest place available. This infant carpenter came into the world laid on wood, and went out of the world the same way, as they laid Him on the wood of the cross. He was born with wood, lived and worked with wood, and died with wood. Wooden stuff played a major role in the life of Jesus.

Christmas and the tree is still a central part of our Christmas. Many times Christians are led to believe that the Christmas tree has a pagan origin. So they refuse to have a tree, or put branches of holly in their homes and churches. If they would read what the Bible says about the Messiah and His relationship to the tree, they would not be duped by such nonsense.

Jesus made the tree, and it is Him that we are to praise for all of it's values and uses. Do not let anybody tell you that what Jesus has made is not appropriate to glorify Him. Pagans have always used grape juice and bread also-are we to cease obedience to Christ and give up these elements as means of remembering Him? Of course not, and so also with the Christmas tree. If the old Norse men worshiped the evergreen, their folly does not become my guide. I go by the Word of God which links the Messiah and the tree, often. Listen to some of the prophesies that concern the branch- "Behold the days come, saith the Lord, that I will raise unto David a Righteous Branch; for behold I will bring forth my servant the Branch; at that time I will cause the Branch of Righteousness to grow up unto David; there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse and a branch shall grow out of his roots, which shall stand for an ensign of the people." There are many more you can find by looking up branch in your concordance.

The point is, long before any pagan mythology, the Messiah of Israel was connected with the tree. There is not a lot of stuff more appropriate for the celebration of the birth of the Messiah than a Christmas tree. Add some lights to symbolize that He is the Light of the World, and decorations to symbolize He came to beautify everything He touched, and you have a beautiful and Biblical symbol of Jesus-the Tree of Life.

The Christmas tree is evergreen, a fitting symbol of the everlasting life Christ came to give. The poet who sees the Christmas tree through Biblically enlightened eyes writes,

O Christmas tree! Fair Christmas tree
A type of Life eternal.
O Christmas tree! Fair Christmas tree!
Your boughs are ever vernal.
So fresh and green in summer heat,
And bright when snows lie round your feet.
O Christmas tree! Fair Christmas tree!
A type of life eternal.

O Christmas tree! Fair Christmas tree!
Alight with love and splendor:
O Christmas tree! Fair Christmas tree!
True praise to Christ you render.
In steadfast faith you flash with light,
As stars of God glow through the night.
O Christmas tree! Fair Christmas tree!
Alight with love and splendor!

You might just as well try to get Christians to stop kissing because the pagans kissed before them, as to try and get them to give up the Christmas tree because some pagans worshiped it. The Bible is our authority for faith and conduct, and not what pagans did or did not do.

Not only did Jesus create all the trees, but He made them a major means by which He blesses the human race. From trees we receive the oxygen we need to breathe. From trees we build the homes and churches in which we live and worship. From trees come the tables at which we enjoy the abundance of the rest of the plant kingdom as well as the animal kingdom. From trees comes the paper to print Bibles, and books, and tracts, by which the message of God reaches the world. The Word that became flesh spreads His Word all over the world by means of trees.

If you can find a better symbol by which to celebrate the birth of the Savior, by all means use it, but don't knock the tree. Poems are made by fools like me but only God can make a tree. The devil never made a tree. Any and all trees should be used to magnify the name of Jesus their Creator. Violet Storey writes,

Oh, lovely way to celebrate your birth
Whose birth star glistened through Judea's trees;
Whom Joseph taught the skillful use of these;
Who, on a Tree, once overcame the earth!
Grant then your blessings, Friend of Trees, we pray
On those who deck green boughs for Christmas day!

This American tradition was almost lost because of a conflict in the White House. President Franklin Pierce entertained the entire Sunday School of the New York Ave. Presbyterian Church with a Christmas tree in the White House. He was followed by President Benjamin Harrison, who also made it a point to have an old fashioned Christmas tree. But when Theodore Roosevelt became President, he was concerned that promoting the use of Christmas trees would damage our natural resources, and so he banned the use of the Christmas tree in the White House. He was very angry when he discovered that his two

boys, Archie and Quentin, had smuggled a tree into their room. The boys appealed to their father's good friend Gifford Pinchot, who was America's first professional forester. He convinced the President that a wise cutting of evergreens would be helpful rather than harmful. So the boys were allowed to keep their tree, and ever since, the White House has had a tree.

Those Christians who grew up in America can hardly imagine a Christmas without a tree. When Billy Graham's oldest daughter and her husband lived in Jerusalem, she told of how she would look up into the December sky, and watch the stars over Bethlehem only a few miles away. Yet it did not seem like Christmas to her, because it was impossible to purchase a tree in Israel. A couple of days before Christmas her Jewish neighbor asked her if she would like a Christmas tree. She told her they would be given away in the center of town by the Jewish Tourist Agency. They gladly got one and searched for lights and balls, and then popped popcorn. Soon their apartment looked like an American apartment at Christmas. Here they were, only a few miles from where Jesus was born, but not until the Christmas tree was set up could they feel the joy of Christmas. Listen to Gigi's closing words as she writes of this experience, "I stood back and looked with satisfaction at the glowing tree. Here, in the land of Jesus' birth, among His people, experiencing my true roots, I realized that this special tree reminded me not only of Bethlehem, but of Calvary. From a cradle to a cross-for me and for all His "chosen" people. My prayer was answered. Joy to the world, the Lord is come."

It would be easy to be critical of her for needing Christmas stuff to get in the spirit. It is all so subjective and so culturally conditioned. That is true, but the question is, is the cultural conditioning based on the Bible? If it is, then the Christmas stuff is legitimate. If you can imagine the Christmas story without the stable, the manger, the cloth, the gold, frankincense, and myrrh, then congratulations on your capacity to experience a super-spiritual Christmas. But for the rest of us, we need stuff. We need Christmas stuff to aid the spirit, and God gave us stuff in the Christmas story because He knew it was important to convey the reality of the Incarnation.

People have different stuff that makes Christmas special to them. Dr. John R. Rice in a Christmas sermon tells of how important oranges were in his Christmas. He lived in Texas where they didn't have oranges then. They all came from California, and were rather expensive. The only time they got oranges was at Christmas. The early growers of oranges in California made a quick fortune. But then invading insects began to kill the trees, and the business was in deep trouble.

C.V. Riley, the chief entomologist of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, devoted his life to finding a solution. He discovered the problem did not exist in Australia, and so he worked out a plan to study the natural enemies of the insects that destroyed citrus trees. He found one and brought it to America. The results were phenomenal. These imported bugs ate the larva of insects, and they multiplied rapidly. They were so valuable that the citrus industry built insectories where they raised them by the billions. They were sent all over the world, and have changed the world economy. Without these little friends the fruit growers of the world would suffer great loss.

So what does this little bug have to do with Christmas? It made oranges possible for those who considered them a special Christmas food. But the more interesting connection is the name of this little bug. It is none other than the lady bug. I was taught as a boy never to kill a lady bug. I push them away but I do not squash them as other bugs, because they kill insects. But I never knew why they were called lady bugs. Now I know. They are so called

after the first lady of Christendom-the mother of Jesus. There was no other bug on the planet so universally connected with the Virgin Mary. In Sweden it is known as The Virgin Mary's Golden Hen. It is the most honored bug in nature. Not only does man treat it kindly but so do the birds and animals. That is why it can multiply so rapidly. It does only good and no evil, and thus, adds to the food supply of all the world. Everytime you enjoy an orange for Christmas or any other time, remember the lady bug, named after the Lady whom God used to bring the Savior into the world.

This is all trivial stuff, but that is the point of this message. Trivial stuff is a part of the Christmas story, and because it is, it is no longer just trivial stuff. Because the Son of God touched it, and was touched by it, all this commonplace stuff takes on significance. Everything in one way or another takes us back to its Creator, and that Creator is the Christ of Christmas. Christmas stuff is to be a reminder to us that God can and does use anything and everything to accomplish His will in this world.

Mary Warren in her book, *Let The Earth Bring Forth*, tells of losing her faith when she lost her husband. She felt hopeless and cared about nothing. God used nature to bring her back to Himself. Listen to her testimony-

If the proper definition of angel is "messenger from God," we are naive to limit the use of the word to those filmy apparitions with wings and halos found in old pictures and Sunday school plays. At times when we cannot be touched by pastor or family members or friends, God is able to employ a total stranger as His messenger, perhaps a grocery clerk or a passenger on a bus, even an author or composer from another century.

I know of no law stating that an angel must be a human figure. In my case, chickadee and tulip, ladybug, cricket and worm may have been His angels watching over me in love.

She is saying that God used a lot of stuff to communicate with her. God uses stuff from the animal, mineral, and vegetable kingdom to speak to us and give us guidance.

Christmas is a very materialistic celebration, and rightly so, for it is the celebration of God, who is Spirit, entering into the material world as flesh. It is the most radical material act in history. In creation God made matter, but in the Incarnation God was made matter. From that point on all that is matter has the potential of being used to glorify God. Christmas stuff is to lead us to praise God for His glorious gift of Himself in Christ. You can get stuff oriented and miss the best of Christmas, but you can also use stuff to help you see the closeness of Christ to you, in that he too came to live among all the same stuff, and use it for His Father's purpose. May God help us to enjoy and use wisely all of our Christmas stuff.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

14. CHRISTMAS TRIVIA based on Luke 2:1-14

One of the great paradoxes of Christmas is that almost everything the Bible tells us about

this most sacred event, is secular in nature. It is filled with what is temporal rather than eternal; physical rather than spiritual; and world oriented rather than heaven oriented. Christmas is really a very earthly event. This was by design, of course, for it marks the beginning of God's personal involvement, in the flesh, on this earthly level of reality. When God became man he went all the way, and participated fully in the secular realm common to all men.

Just being born of a woman was as commonplace as it gets, for this is the universal experience of all men. The Buddhist, the atheist, the cultist, and every other type of person, comes into this world by the same method Jesus came. Birth does not take place in a sacred setting, but in a secular setting, such as a hospital or the home. In the case of Jesus, the setting was even more secular than usual, for he was born in a stable. It is also a very secular job to be running an inn, and keeping up a stable, and shepherding sheep. Taking the census was also very secular, along with paying taxes. The point is the whole setting of the first Christmas is a secular setting. There is not a priest, rabbi, prophet, or preacher anywhere on the scene. The angels do appear to the shepherds in the field and add the heavenly involvement to the story, and the star is seen by the wise men afar, but the fact is, most of what we see is simply secular.

Some of the secular props on the stage of history during this greatest of dramas have played a important role. The church fathers considered the wise men to have been Persians. In 614 A.D. when the Persians invaded and conquered the Holy Land, they did not destroy the oldest church in the world-the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. The reason was because they saw on the golden mosaic over the doorway the wise men depicted as Persians with their native headdress. This was the only holy site they did not attack. This trivial secular detail changed the course of history, as far as this site of the birth of Jesus goes. Without it, the church could have been destroyed. The trivial can play a tremendous role in history. Never underestimate the impact of the seemingly insignificant.

The book, The Ugly American, is about an ugly-faced American engineer, Homer Atkins. He was brought to Vietnam to build dams and roads. While he was there he solved a century old problem by designing a bicycle treadmill pump. No longer did the women have to carry water in pails up the hillside to water the paddies. His wife Emma made this suggestion, for she was concerned about the fact that every woman over 60 had a bent back. The broom the women used had such a short handle, because wood was expensive and in short supply. Emma discovered a long stock reed and planted some near her door. Then she bound coconut fronds to one of the long reeds she cut. She invited women to her house to see her sweep with a long handled broom. It caught on, and years later when Homer and Emma were living back in Pittsburgh, they received a letter from the villagers, part of which went like this-

"In the village of Chang 'Dong today, the backs of our people are straight and firm. No longer are their bodies painful and bent. You will be pleased to know that on the outskirts of the village we have constructed a small shrine in your memory... At the foot are these words: 'In memory of the woman who unbent the backs of our people.' "

Her concern about such a trivial thing as the length of broom handles had a significant impact on the life of a whole people.

As we approach another Christmas it is of interest to focus on some of the trivial secular details the Bible records about this event. We will see that trivia could be called signfica. Significa are the small and minor matters which, nevertheless, have great impact and influence. Every trivial thing that Jesus touched He transformed into signfica.

A cradle was a lowly thing
And held of little worth
Till Jesus in a cradle slept
When first he came to earth.
A woman was a chattel owned
To pamper, scorn, or sell
Till Jesus proffered Living Truth
To one at Jacob's well.
A child? Just one more mouth to feed!
Not held in high esteem
Till Jesus made a little lad
The center of his Theme.
The lowliest death there was to die
Was nailing to a tree:
Aloft his followers hold the Cross-
Symbol of Victory!

-Stella Fisher Burgess.

We are to live by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God, but sometimes they seem so trivial we tend to ignore them. Christmas trivia is a good example. Dr. Luke was a man of detail, and he records for us a number of things that can be called Christmas trivia, but which upon examination become Christmas signfica. Take his mention of Caesar Augustus, for example.

There have been few leaders in history who have been so loved by their followers that they celebrated their birthday with festivities spread over two days. But the first character on the stage of the Christmas story was just such a man. Augustus was one of the greatest leaders of history. His birth was the biggest until the birthday of Jesus surpassed it. People of all ranks in life would bring money presents to the capital, and Augustus would use the money to promote religion in Rome.

Augustus was a deeply religious man in a world that had gone sour on religion. The average roman citizen had abandoned the gods, and had become skeptical. Augustus was determined to bring about a revival of religion, and moral renewal. He restored 82 temples in the city of Rome alone, and built temples and shrines all over the Empire.

He fought to strengthen the traditional family. Men had forsaken marriage, and were being promiscuous. The sensual life-style had caused the population to fall. He passed laws that made promiscuity a crime, and which rewarded men who married and had three children. He fought immorality on the stage, and promoted good entertainment. He was fighting the very battles that Christians are fighting in our culture today.

He was far from perfect, and did some brutal things in his reign, but he held his power and reigned for 44 years, because he was a man for the people. He was just and merciful and did all he could to meet the needs of the poor. He sold government surplus at very cheap rates, and sometimes even gave them away.

He was able to establish an empire where there was peace and prosperity for 55 million people. He did not believe in fighting wars just to prove he was stronger, like many rulers

before and after him. He said those who take great risks in battle for some small advantage are like a man who fishes with a golden hook. Nothing he could catch would be worth the loss of the hook.

He was a man of peace, and when he did conquer a nation, he allowed their own people to continue as their leaders, and he formed friendly relationships by means of intermarriage, just as Solomon did. He was greatly loved, and when he went on a tour of the Empire, his homecomings were events of great celebration. The people and the Senate agreed he should be given the title that Americans gave to Washington-The Father of His Country. When the Senate so proclaimed him, he responded with tears in his eyes and said, "Fathers of the Senate, I have at last achieved my highest ambition. What more can I ask of the immortal gods than that they may permit me to enjoy your approval until my dying day?" This wish was granted.

He was a pagan emperor, yet he is the first character in the Christmas story, because the God of the universe decided to honor him with the role of making a decree that led to the birth of His Son in Bethlehem. This Son was coming into a world that Augustus had prepared. It was a world where peace was more widespread than war; where justice for all men was practiced; where the world was one, and people could travel with comparative safety, making the spread of the Gospel possible.

God honored this great pagan ruler by giving him a role in the greatest story ever told. Our culture honors him also by naming one of the twelve months of the year after him-August. He named this month himself and did it on August 19. When Augustus died in 14 A.D., Jesus was about 19 years old. These were the silent years of His life, and Augustus probably did not even know about Jesus, for He had not yet began His public ministry. But Jesus as a 19 year old knew of him. Augustus was the emperor of the empire in which Jesus was a citizen. Jesus as a carpenter had to pay taxes to this man, and support his causes. When Jesus said render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's, He had done so himself for years.

Augustus played a role in the birth of Jesus, and in the kind of world He would grow up in, and Jesus played a role in his life by inspiring Dr. Luke to include him in the Christmas story. There were dozens of possible ways God could have gotten the prophesy fulfilled of the Messiah being born in Bethlehem, but He chose to use Augustus, and make his name famous for the rest of history.

It is even possible that Augustus did know about Jesus. Herod was the King of Judea when Jesus was born, and Herod was a friend of Augustus. Herod was on the side of Anthony and Cleopatra, but when Augustus defeated them Herod quickly pleaded for forgiveness. He brought large gifts to Rome, and won the favor of Augustus, and they became close personal friends. There was frequent correspondence between Herod and Augustus. Herod as the ruler of the Jews was able to persuade Augustus to give Jews some special privileges in certain parts of the world. Augustus, therefore, knew about the Jews and their religious practices. We know this because we have some of the letters that Augustus wrote himself. In one of them that he wrote to Tiberius he says, "Not even a Jew fasts so scrupulously on his Sabbaths, as I have done today. Not until dusk had fallen did I touch a thing, and that was at the baths, before I had my oil rub, when I swallowed two mouthfuls of bread."

Augustus knew about the Jews, no doubt, because of the close relationship he had with Herod. The two sons of Herod, Antipas and Archelaus, grew up in Rome, and when Herod died it was Augustus who settled the disputes between them. He divided the Kingdom giving

them each part. This Archelaus was the King over Judea when Joseph and Mary and the child Jesus came back out of Egypt.

The point is, the close contact and communication of Augustus with Herod and his family would leave the door open for possible communication about the birth of one called the King of the Jews. Herod was greatly disturbed and all of Jerusalem with him. He took brutal action in trying to kill this new born King by killing the babies of Bethlehem. This sort of thing makes news, and so if Augustus did not hear of it from Herod, it is likely he heard of it by the grapevine. All of this does not prove that he knew of the birth of Jesus, but it shows the fascinating relationship of all the people involved in the Christmas story.

The coming of Jesus was so humble and quiet, and yet it was an international event involving the decree of Augustus 1500 miles away in Rome, and the King of Judea. The whole world was involved even though no one could know the impact of what was going on. Augustus could never know that his death in 767 AUC, that is from the founding of Rome, would for all of history be changed to 14 A. D. in honor of the birth of that baby in Bethlehem that his decree got to that place. He could not know that his birthday would fade, and that the birthday of this obscure child born in an obscure part of the Empire, would become the greatest universal celebration the world would ever know.

Augustus left his mark on history for all time. On the day of his death at age 75 he kissed his wife and said, "Good by, Livia, never forget whose wife you have been!" He died almost at once. He died in September, but in honor of Augustus they changed the month to August, and pushed the whole year ahead. It was a radical change for a man who had radically changed the world.

It was no accident that a man like Augustus was on the stage of history at the time of the Incarnation. It was in the fullness of time that God sent forth His Son to be born of a woman. God selected this time and this place, and in His providence a man like Augustus was the ruler of the earthly kingdom. The value of this whole history is that it helps us see that God had it all planned. Even the secular world was uniquely prepared for the coming of His Son. It was a unique time in secular history, and would become the most unique in sacred history. But the two were not in opposition, but were united by the providence of God. God used the secular decree of Augustus to fulfill prophecy, and thus, we see God is not the God of the sacred only, but the God of the secular as well. It is a challenge to try and recognize God in the secular realm, for He is often hidden, and we tend to miss Him, and do not see that He is involved. The Christmas story so combines the sacred and the secular that we get a good look at how God is involved in both.

In verse 7 we see Mary wrapped Jesus in cloths, and laid him in a manger. Here was the first garment of the Son of God in the flesh, and it was not a garment of royalty or some special anointed cloth from the priest. It was a common every day piece of cloth that would be used for any baby. It was as secular as a modern day diaper. Jesus was sinless, but he still had to wear the garments of fallen man. Adam in his sinlessness was naked and needed no covering. Jesus was sinless, but he identified with fallen man the moment he entered the world, and was clothed with this secular garment. As far as the record goes, Jesus never wore a sacred garment in his life. He had a beautiful seem-less robe, and it became as bright as light on the Mt. of Transfiguration. The soldiers gambled for it at the cross. But there is no record that Jesus ever wore anything but secular clothes. He never became a priest, but was a layman all his life. He wore the garments of the typical man of his day.

Jesus was wrapped up in cloth right out of the womb, and wrapped up again in cloth before he was laid in the tomb. Jesus spent his earthly life, just like you and me, in being

protected and warmed by clothing. This minor detail at his birth makes it clear that he would have suffered chills and possibly a rash from the straw, without the protection of the cloth. This detail makes it clear that Jesus needed all of the secular care of any other baby. He needed to be kept clean and warm, and so Mary had to do everything for Jesus that she did for her other children. He did not live with a halo around His head, and all Mary had to do was pray and everything would be done. It was work, like all motherhood is, for Mary to raise Jesus. Christmas trivia like this makes the reality of the Incarnation come alive. It forces you to see God really did become flesh and dwell among us. Let's look at another trivial detail.

NO ROOM. This tiny bit of Christmas trivia has motivated the use of oceans of ink in speculating about the inn keeper. But what it really tells us is that God did not send His Son into the world with special privileges. He had to come as one of the rest of us, and endure a world where there is no end to inconveniences. God never promised us a rose garden, and He never promised it even to His only Son. Jesus had to put up with more of the problems of secular living than most of us. It is easy to get sentimental about the first Christmas, because of the Christmas songs and idyllic Christmas cards. But the fact is, Jesus came into this world during the rush hour, and it was a mess. There were no special express lanes open for Him and His parents. They just had to put up with the inconvenience and make the best of it.

When you drive into a town late at night, and you are tired, and all you see is no vacancy on the motels, you are not being picked on. You are in the best company, for even this first family in the Kingdom of God had the same experience. The sooner we learn it the better off we will be. God does not give His children special privileges in the secular world. Jesus had to have reservations or be turned away. Jesus had to sleep or be miserably tired. Jesus had to pay taxes and walk dusty roads to get anywhere. Just about any secular thing you have to do, Jesus had to do. He became a common man, and not one who could skip the inconveniences of life. This is the message of the no room in the inn. Nobody was trying to be unkind to Jesus or His parents. This was just the real world where we all have to live.

I discovered an interesting poem to help us see just where other Bible personalities are in relation to the baby Jesus on that first Christmas. Keith Preston writes,

Peter was a fisher boy
helping with the haul;
Pilot was a shavetail
Leading troops in Gaul.
Judas was as innocent
As little child can be;
The wood that made the crucifix
Was still a growing tree;
Unminted was the silver
That made the traitor's pay;
And none had yet commercialized
The spirit of the day.

It is true, the day was not commercialized because nobody knew of its significance, but it is superficial to imply that human nature was different then. No doubt, if Joseph had been richer, or had been a dignitary representing Rome, he could have gotten a room. Bribery worked in Bethlehem, I am sure, and greed was no less alive than it is now. There is no point in trying to idealize the first Christmas, for the whole idea of Christmas trivia is to make it

clear that Jesus was born into the same fallen secular world we all live in. He was not a privileged character, but had the same problems we do, and had to be taken into exile in Egypt soon after He was born. In His adult life, He said the birds have nests and the foxes have holes, but the Son of man has no where to lay His head. Jesus was away from home most of His life. He is still looking for a place to stay in our lives.

Oh, my brothers, are we wiser,
Are we better now than they?
Have we any room for Jesus
In the life we live today?

Room for pleasures-doors wide open
And for business, but for Him
Only here and there a manger
Like to that of Bethlehem.

If you look to Christmas, expecting it to be a spectacular event that will lift you to the peak of ecstasy, you'll probably be setting yourself up for a fall. Christmas trivia tells us to look instead for the blessings in small packages. The trivial details of commonplace life are where we will find our greatest pleasures. There will be inconvenience, untimely travel, bad weather, no room, missed connections, diapers, and spilled eggnog, and a list that could go on and on. This Christmas will be no different than the first one, and we will not escape the realities of a fallen world anymore than did the Christ-child and His parents. But, now as then, God will be working in the midst of all the Christmas trivia to accomplish His purpose in our lives.

The best preparation for Christmas is to look for God in the trivial, and the secular, and be thankful for the blessings of the commonplace. Do not demand of God what His only Son never got, but surrender to Christ and ask Him to fill you with His Spirit, that you might see significance in contemporary Christmas trivia.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

15. THE WONDER OF CHRISTMAS Based on Luke 2:1-20

Typical of last minute Christmas shoppers, a mother was running furiously from store to store. Suddenly she became aware that the pudgy little hand of her three year old son was no longer clutched in hers. In a panic she retraced her steps and found him standing with his little nose pressed flatly against a frosty window. He was gazing at a manger scene. Hearing his mother's near hysterical call, he turned and shouted with innocent glee: "look mommy! it's Jesus-baby Jesus in the hay". With obvious indifference to his joy and wonder, she impatiently jerked him away saying, "we don't have time for that"! On the first Christmas the problem was, no room. The modern problem is, no time for Jesus.

Few of us, if any, could with confidence cast stones at this mother. The attitude of

impatience grips all of us at some point during the Christmas rush. The problem is really not the speed of things for our text tells us that the shepherds came to Bethlehem with great haste. Even on that first Christmas we find the rush of life. But the shepherds had something that is being lost in our modern Christmas. They had a sense of wonder. No matter how fast life is people always have time for what they consider to be wonderful. The curse of modern man is to be so busy he has no time for wonder. Dag Hammarskjöld said years ago, "If spiritual things become a drag and the message of Christmas is dull you can be sure the problem is not in the message but in your loss of awe and wonder at the message".

A group traveling by train through the Rocky Mountains was thrilled and visibly moved by the magnificent panorama. A woman on the train with them hardly raised her eyes from her book, and when she was asked why she explained, "this is the thirteenth time I have crossed the mountains. The first time I could not keep the tears from rolling down my cheeks, so impressed was I. But now I have known it so well that I frequently

go through the whole range with scarcely a glance out of the window". Her sense of wonder was gone and she no longer recognized the grandeur of the breath-taking beauty around her. This same principle is constantly at work in relation to the marvel, mystery and majesty of God and the wonder of Christmas.

Lawrence Housman, who opened the way for religious drama in twentieth century England with his famous nativity play, told of an incident that happened during rehearsal. The wise men paid their tribute and retired off stage. All lights were to be turned off, except the one shining on the manger. Someone by mistake turned off all the lights leaving the stage in utter darkness. A voice shouted, "hey there-you've switched off Jesus!" This is what is happening on the stage of history today. Jesus is being switched off and Christmas without Jesus is incapable of inspiring any lasting awe and wonder.

Dylan Thomas, in his reflections on A Child's Christmas in Wales, shows the pathetic and pitiful result of a purely secular Christmas where love for Christ and wonder at His coming are not instilled in the heart. He writes, "One Christmas was just like another....I can never remember whether it snowed for six days and six nights when I was twelve or whether it snowed for twelve days and twelve nights when I was six." When Jesus is switched off, this is the kind of heritage that is passed on. No matter how much earthly glory you put into it, it is a fading and temporal glory which cannot move you to the depths of your soul.

The trivial always becomes tame and tiresome but the eternal message of Christmas and the Incarnation: "God contracted to a span, incomprehensibly made man", always carries in it the potential for inspiring wonder. We want to study Luke's account of the first Christmas from the point of view of the wonders involved. Just scratching the surface of a match can cause it to burst into flame and though that is all we can do with Luke's record, scratch the surface, it is hoped that this will kindle a flame of wonder in our hearts for Christmas. Consider first-

I. THE WONDER OF THE FIRST CHRISTMAS SETTING.

How can we help but marvel as we look back at the matchless mystery of God in a manger and the circumstances and characters on the stage during this great drama. John Adams, a founding father of our country, said, "I always consider the settlement of America with reverence and wonder, as the opening of a grand scene and design in Providence for the illumination of the ignorant and the emancipation of the slavish part of mankind all over the earth". He was a man who knew how to wonder at the providence of God in history. How

much greater the wonder of God entering history as a child in a manger.

**Here's a wonder never known,
A king a manger makes his throne.**

The paradoxes of that first Christmas are fantastic. The most high as a lowly babe; the details of prophecy worked out by God's providence yet no provision of a room for the creator of all space. God's perfect plan was being worked out but the actors had to be in a state of confusion. Imagine the emotions of Mary and Joseph as the day of her delivery drew near. What was going to happen? The Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem but the Angel did not say anything about this to Mary. What were they to do? Should they deliberately go to Bethlehem to fulfill prophecy even though they had no revelation on the matter? Who knows what anxieties they suffered? Then came the decree of Caesar that opened the way to go to Bethlehem and they are amazed at the marvelous providence of God.

The record of Luke, which he received from Mary, conveys details that reveal the deep gratitude of Mary for God's loving guidance in all the problems she faced in bringing forth the Messiah. God had provided her with the refuge and comfort of her cousin Elizabeth. Now as the child is to be born only six months after her marriage to Joseph, God works out a plan to fulfill prophecy and also take her away from Nazareth

for the birth of her child. We see the wonder of God's thoughtfulness in dealing with Mary and Joseph .

We see also the wonder of God's casting in this great drama. Caesar Augustus, the Emperor of the mighty Roman Empire, plays only an incidental part. Enter mighty Caesar in all your pomp and glory and make your decree; then exit, for in the rest of the drama the lowly are exalted. The main characters in this drama apart from Mary, Joseph and the child are persons even more obscure and lowly than they. The shepherds play the prominent supporting role and they were persons held in contempt by the leaders in society. Nothing is a parallel but imagine the president of the United States working out a Middle East peace plan and instead of announcing this news of great joy to congress he goes to a meeting of garbage collectors and announces it there. Such a procedure would leave the whole world stunned and in a state of disbelieving wonder. Yet it cannot compare with the wonder of God's humility and condescension in this first Christmas setting. God gives the best news in history to the lowly and the obscure.

Back before World War II, one of Europe's royal families announced the building of a five thousand dollar crib for a baby born into the family. Carving, metal work, studded jewels and artistry led to this enormous expense. But the royal son of David and greater yet, the Son of God, is laid in a manger made for feeding animals.

**O most Mighty! O most Holy
Far beyond the seraphs thought,
Art Thou then so mean and lowly
As unheeded prophets taught?**

The wonder of the first Christmas setting is a gift of God to all of us. It assures us that God cares for the lowly and the unknown and not just the celebrities of the world. Secondly look at-

II. THE WONDER OF THE FIRST CHRISTMAS SONG.

Mary magnified the Lord and Zechariah sang blessed be the Lord God of Israel, in their pre-Christmas songs. Now on the first Christmas we hear an angelic anthem ringing over the Judean hills. Again, the paradox of the setting is wonderful. Here is the greatest choir ever assembled on earth to sing the greatest hymn of praise and the audience is a handful of shepherds. Nothing was too extravagant to bear witness to the wonder of the Incarnation. The pre-Christmas songs of expectation were solos, but now that the wonder of God in human flesh was a visible reality, a vast multitude was necessary to make music appropriate for the event. If all heaven rang as the angels sang, then how can we who are the benefactors of God's Christmas gift ever cease to sing and wonder.

The wonder of the first Christmas song is that it says so much with so few words. The essence of praise is in the phrase, glory to God in the highest. The essence of salvation is in the phrase, peace on earth to men in whom God is pleased. The peace is not for all but only for those who are reconciled to God by faith in his Son. The peace is that of forgiveness of sin and fellowship with God. This is the basis for singing glory to God in the highest.

When young Queen Victoria had just ascended to the throne, she was to attend a presentation of Handel's Messiah. She was instructed not to rise when others stood for the Hallelujah Chorus. As the orchestra and chorus resounded with "...for the Lord God Omnipotent reigneth," she remained seated with difficulty. But when the chorus began to sing that overpowering musical line, "For He Is King of Kings, And Lord Of Lords," she suddenly stood and bowed her head, as if to take her crown and cast it at His feet. Such is the power of music when the majesty of God is the theme. Her actions were a silent singing of Glory to God in the highest.

May God help each of us to catch the spirit of wonder that compels us to praise and glorify His name in song. All we need to do is recognize that the wonder of it all is that all the wonder of it involves us personally.

To God on high all glory be,
Who gave his only son for me,
For which the angels carol clear,
And sing us such a glad New Year.

Finally look at-

III. THE WONDER OF THE FIRST CHRISTMAS SERMON.

The setting and the song of the first Christmas are usually only considered once a year at Christmas time. But the first Christmas sermon is the very essence of what the church exists for proclaiming the year around. It is the good news of joy to all people. "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord". The wonder of the first Christmas sermon is a living wonder for it goes on and on repeating itself every time the gospel is preached. The setting is gone and does not relate to us. The song comes closer in that we can enter into the angelic anthem of praise. But the wonder of wonders is the sermon-the message which makes Christmas as contemporary as the light of the sun. Christmas is a continuously contemporary event. Wherever the message of it is preached something wonderful still happens. Jesus Christ is born again in the hearts of those who believe.

Yet as Lucretius once said, "Nothing is so great or so wonderful but all men, little by

little, abate their wonder". That is why Christians need to be constantly regenerated in wonder at the marvel of God's gift of His Son.

We hear the message so often that it becomes dull and commonplace. It is in the sharing of this good news that the wonder is kept alive. The shepherds repeated the sermon of the angels and note the result in verse 18- "and all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds". Wonder is kept alive by multiplication. Wonder is like the fire of a candle; if it is kept to itself it will go out, but if it is touched to another candle's wick it will multiply itself.

Paul preached the gospel over and over yet he never got tired of it but could say, "thank God for His inexpressible gift". Because he spread the gospel and saw it's power in the lives of people he never lost his sense of wonder. Let us share the wonder of God's love in the Christmas message and we too will never lose our sense of wonder.

Love caused Thine Incarnation,
Love brought Thee down to me;
Thy thirst for my salvation
Procured my liberty.
O love beyond all telling
That led Thee to embrace
In love, all love excelling,
Our lost and fallen race.

The play by Joseph Hayes, *The Desperate Hours*, illustrates on an earthly level what God did for us in sending His Son into the world to destroy the works of the devil. The play is about an escaped bandit who keeps a family prisoner in their own home. He holds a ten year old boy in front of him as a shield. Unknown to anyone, the father was able to get at the bandit's two guns and unload one and keep the other. The climax comes when the father stands across the room from the bandit who holds his son. He alone knows that the bandit's gun is unloaded and that all would be okay if his son would pull away. He shouts, "pull away son, he can't hurt you!" The convict warns, "try it and see." The father urges him, "it has no bullets in it, run!" The boy with great faith in his father runs and the bandit's gun clicks helplessly without power to enslave any longer. This is what the wonder of Christmas is all about. God has, in the gift of his Son, defeated the power of Satan to enslave. He now calls to all men, "come unto me and I will save and set you free".

Happy all who hear the message
Of His coming from above:
Happier still who hail his coming
And with praises greet his love.
Blessed Savior, Christ most holy
In a manger Thou didst rest
Canst Thou stoop again, yet lower,
And abide within my breast?

The wonder of wonders is His answer is yes! This is the never ending Wonder Of Christmas.