

Introduction

There are stories we have come to know and love that surround the coming of Messiah, a celebration we call Christmas. These stories have been told and retold. Songs have been sung about these miraculous events. But with something that becomes so familiar, the danger is that we sometimes can miss the power and true meaning of what is happening. This is no more true than in the Extraordinary Tales of Christmas.

As we go through this series, take some time to dive a little deeper into how marvelous, how miraculous, and how truly astounding it is that God became flesh and dwelt among us. The stories that surround what is arguably the high point in the history of mankind, of God becoming flesh, are packed full of awe, wonder, and power.

Week One

As we begin reading in the Gospel of Luke, we come across a story that can easily be overlooked. A simple priest, Zacharias, one of some 8,000 priests at the time taking their turn in serving at the temple. These 8,000 priests were divided into 24 courses, or divisions. Each division would serve twice a year for one week doing their duties to support the operation of the temple. With so many priests available, there eventually developed a lottery system to choose which priest would have the honor of these sacred duties. They would even divide each task into teams to allow more priests to participate. According to the Mishnah, a team chosen to offer incense might win the right to scoop up the ashes, or to prepare the incense, or to even offer or burn the incense. Each of these sacred duties might only come along once or twice in the life of a priest.

It just so happened that at this most auspicious occasion, the lot fell to Zacharias to burn the incense inside the Holy Place at the Golden altar of incense. While this was a most exciting experience for Zacharias, as we read, much more excitement was to come. As he was performing his duties, the angel Gabriel appeared to him standing next to the altar. Gabriel shares the good news of the coming of a son for Zechariah. But as we read on in the story, we come to a fascinating description. It says in Luke 1:17 that this son of the priest will be a forerunner of Messiah, announcing and preparing His way. And that he will come in the spirit and power of Elijah. This is a statement we may quickly pass over.

But if we dig a little into what this means we can see this is a moment of extraordinary significance. As we recall from 2 Kings 1-2 the prophet Elijah was arguably the pinnacle

of Old Testament prophets. The power and authority he wielded and the testimony he bore witness to was second to none. When he left this earth, God deemed it appropriate that Elijah should not have to bear the indignity of death. So God sent a chariot down to carry Elijah alive up to Heaven. As he left, his mantle, the symbol of his authority fell to his apprentice Elisha. But what is most interesting is what happened to his mantle following Elisha. According to Hebrew tradition, this mantle was stored in a compartment in the altar of incense. So as Zechariah was being given this extraordinary news from Gabriel, he was able to take that sacred mantle that had belonged to the prophet Elijah back to his home for when his son John was ready for it.

With that background, let's explore a bit of what John the Baptist coming in the spirit and power of Elijah might mean.

1. What was some unexpected news (good or bad) you have received? How did you react? Read Luke 1:1-25 to get a sense of what God is doing in this passage.

2. At one of the most significant moments of Jesus ministry Jesus takes His most beloved apostles with Him to experience what we call the Mount of Transfiguration. Read Matthew 17:1-13. Discuss why you think both Moses and Elijah were represented? What was the key question the disciples asked in verse 10? Discuss Jesus' answer in verse 11-12.

3. The passage the disciples were referring to comes at the very end of the last book of the Old Testament. Read Malachi 4:4-6. How significant do you think it is that this is literally the last message in the Old Testament, before 400 years of silence, of no revelation from God? How do you think Jews in Jesus day, and especially the disciples understood this passage? How does this passage help us understand Jesus' answer in Matt 17:11-12?

4. What did Jesus think of His cousin John the Baptist? Turn over to Luke 7:24-28. What did Jesus say about John? Why do you think Jesus heaped such high praise on John? Then what does this say about the significance of the coming kingdom (v.28b)?

5. Read Luke 1:67-79. List out some of the duties God had in store for this forerunner of Messiah. How are these duties any different than what we are called to do as ambassadors of Christ? How might we engage in these activities as we point people to the second coming of Messiah?

Going deeper:

1. For Jews around the world, at every Passover celebration an empty seat is set and reserved for Elijah. And a child opens the front door hoping that this will be the year Elijah comes. But how did Elijah come to be part of this special celebration. Jewish tradition points to Ezra and Nehemiah who set out the yearly schedule of readings all Jews would participate in. At the Shabbat haGadol (the Great Sabbath) every year, the Sabbath that immediately precedes the celebration of Passover, this passage in Malachi is read. So what was the last thing every Jew heard as they began their journey to Jerusalem for Passover? It was Malachi 4:4-6 where we hear about the coming of Elijah to prepare the way for Messiah. How does this help us understand the story in Luke 2:41-50? What was "His Father's business" Jesus was preparing Himself for some 21 years later, on the greatest Shabbat haGadol of all time when He would offer Himself up as the ultimate Passover offering?

2. It says of John in Luke 1:15 that he will drink no wine or liquor. Not drinking alcohol was a sign of special consecration to the Lord. Priests were not allowed to drink alcohol when serving at the temple (Lev 10:9). And there were also those who would take a Nazirite vow for a time of being set apart for service. It appears that Gabriel is setting aside John as a Nazirite for life. Read Numbers 6:1-4. Discuss what life would have been like for John, living in the desert, wearing animal skins, and living a life set apart—with a singular focus. How is our life really to be any different? What kind of set apart life are we called to live?

Week Two

Another episode in the miraculous coming of Messiah revolves around the earthly father of Jesus. It would be easy to overlook Joseph simply because not much is mentioned of him in scripture. But Joseph played a key role in the upbringing of Jesus. A little background on who Joseph was might be helpful in our understanding of the challenges he faced.

Despite depictions we might have seen of Mary and Joseph being from an obscure family in a backwater, poverty stricken town, Joseph was actually a descendent of King David, the greatest king of Israel. Matthew tells us that Joseph was born into the royal line of David. Almost 1000 years had passed since King David died, when Joseph was born. The scriptures had predicted that the Messiah would be born of the royal line of David, thus, Jesus was a legal descendant of King David. This lineage came with prestige and respect. We see this verified in the beginning of both Matthew and Luke, in their respective genealogies delineating this heritage.

Each of the genealogies of Christ recorded in the Gospels offer a unique perspective. Matthew lists the generations from Abraham through King David and traces Jesus' royal lineage all the way down to Joseph, Jesus' earthly father. The book of Matthew was written primarily for the Jews to demonstrate that Jesus was and is their long-awaited Messiah—thus highlighting His connection to Abraham. Whereas, the genealogy in Luke traces the bloodline from Adam to David (this genealogy from Abraham to David is identical to Matthew's account), but then Luke diverges from Matthew after King David, tracing the lineage not through Solomon but another son of David, Nathan, to Heli, the father of Mary, Jesus' mother. The significance is that

the combined force of these two complementary genealogies establish Jesus' absolute right to the throne of David: through the bloodline of Mary (Luke 3:23–38); and by title through Mary's husband, Joseph.

Diving even deeper into the background helps us see that there was an established Jewish custom in how a marriage covenant between a man and his future bride would play out. This betrothal custom began with a young man visiting the prospective bride's home. He would ask for her father's permission and pay a bride price to seal the covenant. Then the bridegroom would return to his home for about 12 months, during which time the man would prepare their dwelling. It was during this separation that Mary became pregnant with Jesus through the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit. Certainly, this righteous man Joseph must have been devastated to learn that his beloved was pregnant with a child that was not his own. But Joseph was a man of God, he loved and respected Mary. Rather than publicly disgrace her, his thought was to quietly divorce her, as it was only through divorce that this betrothal covenant could be broken. But no matter how difficult it might have been, Joseph followed the directive by God, through the angel to trust Him and make Mary his wife.

Joseph, the earthly father of Jesus, although due much respect for being in the royal line, was a man of humility, mercy, and integrity. We find the key in Matthew 1:19 as to why Joseph was able to follow God's directions without a second thought—it says Joseph was a righteous man. It would take such a righteous and humble man to endure the ridicule he doubtless faced for staying with Mary.

The last we hear about Joseph in Scripture is in Luke 2:39–40, when Jesus is 12 years old: "When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth. And the child grew and

became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him." These two were handpicked by God to be the perfect parents to raise God's only Son.

1. When have you felt God's leading in a certain direction you weren't sure you wanted to go? What was your reaction and response? What did you learn through this circumstance?

2. Read Matt 1:24 and notice what it does not say. It does not say Joseph struggled mightily with what the angel told him to do. It does not say that Joseph prayed about it for 3 weeks, or that he cast lots to determine if this was truly God's will. It says that he arose from his sleep and obeyed. What does this tell us about the character of Joseph? How do you think this character helped Joseph raise up Jesus as his earthly son?

3. Read through Matt 2:13-15 and discuss what this must have been like, to flee in the middle of the night with a young baby to a foreign country, not knowing where you would live, or when you might be able to come home. What obstacles and challenges do you think they faced? Then discuss the gifts God arranged for Joseph and Mary, and how God always provides for us in what He allows to come our way (Matt 2:11).

4. Where have you seen displayed this kind of unwavering trust in God with people you know? What are some stories of absolute trust in God that have inspired you?

5. Where in your life do you hear the Holy Spirit speaking to you regarding your need to trust Him?

Going Deeper:

1. When we hear about an earthly profession of Jesus we invariably hear mentioned that He was a carpenter. But was He? Have we been victim of faulty cultural assumptions? In Matthew 13:55 we read that the crowd asks, "...is this not the carpenter's son?" But was Joseph actually a carpenter? The word here (*tekton* in the Greek), unfortunately translated as "carpenter" is more accurately rendered "craftsman or builder." Back in 1611 when the King James was translated, what were the houses primarily built with? They were primarily wood houses. And so a "builder" would naturally be assumed to be a carpenter. And so "Tekton" has very often since been translated as "carpenter." But in the time of Jesus nearly all the dwellings were made of stone. Knowing that trees were relatively scarce in that region, it makes much more sense that Joseph would have been much more of a stone mason. We read of David and Solomon importing cedars all the way from Lebanon for their palaces. Yet very near the town of Nazareth was an enormous rock quarry. Read through a few passages that make reference to stones and discuss how they connect with Jesus. Read Luke 20:17-18; Acts 4:11-12; 1 Peter 2:4-8; Eph 2:19-22.

2. Read Matt 2:19-23. How did unforeseen circumstances change the plans of Joseph? How do you see God working behind the scenes in these verses to accomplish His goals? How have you seen God speak to you through life circumstances, and change the plans you might have had? What was the result?

Extraordinary Tales of Christmas

Tale of Shepherds

Luke 2:8-20

December 9th, 2018

Week Three

The image of a shepherd is a common one in scripture. From David as the prototypical shepherd, all the way to Jesus, our good shepherd. What can we learn from this powerful image?

A shepherd lived with the sheep in the pasturelands. He made sure they had enough to eat and protected them from harm. When the sheep came in for the night, the shepherd would lie down across the opening of the pen. By doing so, he made himself a barrier between potential danger and his flock. This is what Jesus meant when He said, "I am the gate", or "I am the door of the sheep." Oftentimes more than one flock of sheep was penned together at night. In the morning, each shepherd would call his sheep by name and the animal would come out of the crowded pen to follow him. The sheep knew their shepherd's voice. Jesus said, "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me" (John 10:27). The message behind the statement, "I am the good shepherd," was that of security, safety, and comfort. But there is much more in this "good shepherd" passage than meets the eye.

The context in which we find John 10 helps us understand that Jesus was making a rather radical declaration by the way He phrased the statement, "I am the good shepherd." There was incredible contention between Jesus and the Jewish religious leaders of the time, who were seeking to have Jesus killed. In response to this opposition Jesus was pointing out His divine origin and their hypocrisy—both of which made them furious. The book of John mentions several occasions when Jesus' life was in danger.

Their complaint was that Jesus, being a man, made Himself out to be God (John 5:18, 10:33). This message is crystal clear in the book of John. In fact, there are seven statements by Jesus in which He used the name of God (I AM) for Himself. These are known as the seven "I am" statements:

"I am the bread of life" (John 6:35).

"I am the light of the world" (8:12).

"I am the gate" (10:9).

"I am the good shepherd" (10:11).

"I am the resurrection and the life" (11:25).

"I am the way and the truth and the life" (14:6).

"I am the vine" (15:5).

In this Good Shepherd passage in John 10, there are two of these "I am" statements. In this greater context, we can see that this isn't just an analogy where Jesus is saying we're like sheep and He's like a shepherd. He's explicitly claiming to be God by speaking these words. And He's risking death by making such statements. This perhaps helps us understand even more clearly what Jesus means when He says that He lays His life down for His sheep. He not only gave His life, but He was constantly risking His life.

What else do we learn about the shepherds to whom this message came? In the Mishnah is recorded that a belief had arisen that the Messiah would be revealed from the Migdal Eder ("the tower of the flock"). This tower stood close to Bethlehem on the road to Jerusalem. This is very near the place where this announcement by the angels would have come. And the sheep that pastured there were not the type used for ordinary purposes. With the establishment of Temple worship in Jerusalem, the fields outside of Bethlehem became the place where a special group of shepherds

raised the very lambs that were sacrificed in the Temple. So, in a very fitting way, the announcement of the birth of Christ came to the shepherds who kept watch over the lambs who were destined for sacrifice.

1. In the stories Jesus told about shepherds, some of them did seemingly crazy things to find their lost sheep. What was something valuable you have lost and what lengths did you go to find it?

2. How did the wise men coming to Herod know where to find the Messiah? When Herod asked the chief priests and scribes, they pointed him to the book of Micah. Read Micah 2, starting in verse 2, all the way through the beginning of verse 5. What do we learn about the coming Messiah from this passage?

3. Read aloud Luke 2:8-20. Try to put yourselves in the shoes (or sandals) of the shepherds, and describe what you think they would have been thinking and feeling at this moment? Seeing that they were often the outcasts of society, the ones who were forced to live away from home for long periods of time; lonely and forgotten. What would this experience have been like for them? How do you think you would have reacted in that same situation?

4. What are some of the responses you see in the world around you to the Good News that Messiah has come—as well as to the truth that He is coming again?

5. What responses to the Good News of the coming of Messiah do you see present in your life (great joy, curiosity, praise, telling others, amazement, etc.)? What are some examples of this you can share? Which of these responses do not seem to be present with you? What should our response be to the coming of Messiah into the world?

Going Deeper:

1. Read Psalm 23 out loud. List out what we learn about God and what He does to take care of us. Share some examples of how God has done this in your life.

2. What are the 3 titles attributed to Jesus in Luke 2:11? What is the meaning of each? What does this tell us about His identity?

3. (Extra credit) How is this Good News universal (2:10)? How is it not universal (2:14b)?

Week Four

Although he was named King over the Jewish people, King Herod was not actually Jewish. He was Idumean (from Edom). If you recall, the name Edom (red) was given to Esau, the twin brother of Jacob, and his descendants were Edomites. The Greeks referred to them as Idumeans. There was tension and often even hatred between the Jews and Edomites, ever since they did not allow Israel to pass through their land on the way to the Promised Land.

King Herod was a schemer who took advantage of Roman political unrest to claw his way to the top. During a time of war in the Roman Empire, Herod appealed to Octavian, who later became Augustus Caesar. Augustus made Herod King of the region. In order to curry favor with the Jewish people, who saw him as an outsider, Herod embarked on a robust building plan in Israel. He restored the long neglected Temple in Jerusalem, and built the spectacular port city of Caesarea, naming it after the Roman Emperor. He also built a fortress in Masada, as a military refuge. He also built a new market, an amphitheater, a theater, a new building where the Sanhedrin could convene, and a new royal palace.

What Herod is certainly most remembered for is the slaughter of the innocent babies in the region surrounding Bethlehem. Herod could not face the idea of losing his throne to this one who was "born king of the Jews" and was not above such inconceivable barbarity as killing young babies to protect his position.

Two Old Testament prophecies were fulfilled because of King Herod the Great. When Herod ordered the murder of all babies two years and younger in the area of

Bethlehem, it fulfilled Jeremiah 31:15: "This is what the Lord says: 'A voice is heard in Ramah, mourning and great weeping, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.'" Joseph took Mary and Jesus and fled to Egypt because of the warning from the angel, in response to the threat by Herod. After Herod died, they returned, fulfilling Hosea 11:1: "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son."

Joseph and Mary did not return to Israel until Herod had died, but ended up settling up in the Galilee region to avoid Herod's son. The Jewish historian Flavius Josephus reported that Herod the Great died of a painful and debilitating disease that caused breathing problems, convulsions, rotting of his body, and worms. Herod reigned 37 years. He was a wicked ruler who was not above killing his wives and his own sons to keep his power. Herod's kingdom was divided by the Romans among his three sons.

Emperor Augustus reportedly said it was better to be Herod's sow than his son, for his sow had a better chance of surviving. In the Greek language, as in English, there is only one letter difference between the words "sow" (huos) and "son" (huios). Following in his father's footsteps, Herod Antipas murdered John the Baptist and allowed Jesus to be crucified because he did not want any threats to his throne. There are several prominent "Herods" in the history surrounding the New Testament, all the way from Herod the Great, to Herod Antipas, and down to Herod Agrippa who ruled in the time of the Apostle Paul.

1. What is the biggest surprise you have ever experienced? What was your immediate reaction?

2. Discuss the difference between these various reactions to the coming of Messiah. The wise men travelled many months in an arduous journey bearing gifts of significant value. And they came and worshipped. The religious leaders knew where Messiah would be born and did nothing about it. And the satanically inspired response in Herod was a mass slaughter of babies. Why the various responses?

3. Read again Matthew 2:9-10 (preferably from a few different translations). What specific details do you notice from these verses about the star? How do these details militate against any kind of naturalistic explanation for the appearance of the star (that it might have been simply a comet or supernova)?

4. So often it is easy for the meaning of Christmas to get lost amidst the commercialism and gift giving traditions that Christmas has become in our society. It can be challenging to fight against that pull to keep the savior at the forefront of our Christmas gatherings. What are some ways you have incorporated worship into your family celebration of Christmas, and have attempted to fight against the draw from the world to secularize Christmas?

5. What is the primary message of Christmas (in a sentence or two)? How do you think the Holy Spirit is speaking to your heart today about how this message should change how you live your everyday life?

Going Deeper:

1. If you recall from the book of Daniel, Daniel was in the position of “Rab-Mag,” or chief of the Magi. It is believed that Daniel, after having been given the date of the birth of Messiah from the angel Gabriel (Daniel 9:24-27), then organized the Magi from then on to be the ones who would welcome and anoint the Messiah upon His arrival. The Magi were the king-makers in the region and would have travelled with a large retinue, including an imposing military force—thus the reason “all of Jerusalem” was troubled at their arrival (Matt 2:3). This was not merely 3 old wise men on camels. Discuss the significance of the arrival of the Messiah, God in human flesh, being announced to and welcomed by the lowest of the low, as well as the highest of the high in society.

2. What was the significance of each of the 3 gifts Mary was given?

Extraordinary Tales of Christmas

Tale of Angels

1 Peter 1:12

December 23rd, 2018

Week Five

You may have noticed, in the passages we have looked at surrounding the birth of Christ, angels have played a significant role in the announcement of the coming of Messiah. In fact, one of their primary jobs is to be messengers for God. The term "angelos" in Greek actually means "messenger." But what does the Bible say about angels? As we approach this topic one thing we need to be careful of is to not allow literature and popular culture color our picture of what angels are truly like. Some of us may have visions of chubby little cherubs, or beautiful women with wings and long, flowing locks of hair.

When we read these angelic announcements in scripture there is one thing we find in common. In Luke 1:11-13 we see the angel Gabriel appearing to Zacharias in the temple. What is the first thing Gabriel says to Zacharias? "Do not be afraid." In Luke 1:26-30 we see an angel appearing to Mary. What does the angel say to Mary in v.30? "Do not be afraid." In Luke 2:8-10 an angel appeared to the shepherds in the fields. What is the first thing he says to them? "Do not be afraid" (v.10). In fact, all throughout the Bible this a very common theme. Whenever angels appear to people, their first reaction is normally sheer terror. Why is that the case?

The first reason for this kind of reaction is that angels are described as appearing in awe-inspiring glory and possessing overwhelming power. One physical description we see of an angel in Daniel 10 notes that "his body was like beryl, his face had the appearance of lightening, his eyes were like flaming torches, his arms and feet like the gleam of polished bronze, and the sound of his words like the sound of a tumult." Daniel writes of his own reaction. He says, "...no strength was left in me, for

my natural color turned to a deathly pallor, and I retained no strength (10:8). Again, this angel's message was, "do not be afraid." After the resurrection of Jesus in Matthew 28, an angel came and rolled away the stone and sat on it. His appearance it says, "...was like lightening, and his garment was white as snow." It goes on to say that the guards actually shook for fear of him, and passed out like dead men. The appearance of cherubim and seraphim (which seem to be a special class or rank of angel) in Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Revelation are described in even more detail, with some having 6 wings, others being covered all over their body with eyes, and others having 4 faces. The physical description of angels is awe-inspiring to say the least.

But a second reason for this reaction is that whenever we sinful creatures are exposed to the holy, we begin to see how sinful we truly are and we cringe in fear and shame. These messengers from God, while still merely creations and not possessing the attributes of deity, are called holy by Jesus (Luke 9:26). Whenever the mortal is exposed to the holy we cannot but tremble in fear. When Daniel first saw Gabriel in Dan 8:17-18, he fell on his face and passed out in fear. In Luke 24:5 the women at Jesus' tomb bowed their faces to the ground in terror. When the Lord shook the mountain at the giving of His commandments, the whole camp trembled. When Isaiah saw the vision of God in Isaiah 6 he cried out "woe is me, for I am undone." On the Mount of Transfiguration, when the disciples heard the voice of God, they fell on their faces, terrified. Examples of this are endless.

The truth is, we walk around in a sin-filled world, with sin-filled hearts; all the while longing for the perfection God created us for. When God deigns to pull back the curtain as He did for His Son on the Mount of Transfiguration, we get a glimpse; really, a preview of what awaits us in Heaven. And we are devastated to our core with the realization of how far removed from holiness we truly are. And that is one

of the roles angels fill in the Bible. They shock us into a reality we are unaware of. They awaken us to the life that is to come. They open our eyes to what kind of creatures we must become to be able to stand in the presence of God. So let us not be drawn into caricatures or inferior representations of how truly awesome angels are.

1. Growing up, what was your understanding of angels? How has that understanding changed over the years?

2. What do we learn about angels from the following passages:

- a) Rev. 7:1; 2 Kings 19:35
- b) Dan 9:20-23; Dan 10:10-14
- c) 1 Pet 1:12; Matt 24:36

3. Read 1 Pet. 1:10-12. Discuss what it is you understand these things to be—"things into which angels long to look." Why do you think this is so?

4. What do you think the common understanding is about what/who angels are, with those in the world around us? Have you noticed the drastic rise in the number of television programs and movies that center around angelic/demonic activity in the last 10 years? Why do you think that is?

5. Someone once said that two dangers we can fall into is to first, think too little about Satan, and the other is to think too much. How can an unhealthy obsession with the angelic/demonic realm draw us away from a healthy trust in God and His sovereignty?

Going Deeper:

1. Read 2 Kings 6:8-19; Rev 12:7 and Daniel 10:10-21. What we see in Rev. 12 is that there is a war that is being waged in the Heavenly realm that we may not be aware of. We see in 2 Kings 6 that these armies may be all around us whether or not we can see them. And we learn a lot about angelic warfare from Daniel chapter 10. We learn that angels and demons are territorial in some sense—that perhaps particular angels & demons are assigned to specific kingdoms. We learn that some angels are more powerful than others. We learn that angels are dispatched in response to specific prayers. In Daniel 9:20-23 we see that the angel with the answer to that particular prayer arrived with the answer before Daniel even finished praying. How long did it take for the angel in Daniel 10 to arrive (Dan 10:2-3, 13)? What prevented him? If Daniel had not continued to pray throughout all three weeks, do you think the angel would have continued his fight? In other words, what do you think the connection is between the fervency of our prayers, and the answer from God? What else do we learn about angelic warfare from Daniel 10?

2. How can Romans 8:28 color our view of the world around us, of the impact spiritual warfare can have, and the confidence we have in His sovereign control?
