

Better Than Bethlehem

by Dr. J. Vernon McGee



Published and distributed by
Thru the Bible Radio Network
P.O. Box 7100
Pasadena, California 91109-7100
(800) 65-BIBLE
www.ttb.org

Scripture references are from the *King James Version Bible*.

Preface

We are approaching a crisis Christmas and a new year filled with ominous and threatening clouds. We are losing our liberties one by one. Our religious liberty especially is in imminent danger of being lost.

In spite of the black background, never has the Christian been afforded such a marvelous opportunity, an open door for witnessing to the saving power of the Lord Jesus Christ. Never has the hope of the Christian burned brighter. We need to look up and away from the waves and breakers rolling beneath us, for the coming of the Lord draweth nigh.

May all the joy that the Lord has provided for His own be experienced by you and yours in this season and until we see Him face to face.

BETTER THAN BETHLEHEM

And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. (And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.) And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:) to be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child. And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn. (Luke 2:1-7)

The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto him, to show unto his servants things which must shortly come to pass; and he sent and signified it by his angel unto his servant John: who bare record of the word of God, and of the testimony of Jesus Christ, and of all things that he saw. Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein: for the time is at hand. (Revelation 1:1-3)

The birth of Jesus Christ at Bethlehem is an event which has more historical significance than has any other single fact of history. His coming made an impact upon the world that is unparalleled. No fact in history of corresponding importance has had such far-reaching results. The rising of the sun on the eastern horizon in the dark dawn is not any more transforming to the earth than was the coming of the One to the stable back of the inn in Bethlehem, He who bears the title of "The Bright and Morning Star" and of "The Sun of Righteousness."

The coming of Christ ushered in a new day. The calendar of the civilized world was changed by His birth. Before His coming, history moved toward Bethlehem. Since His coming, this stable is the fountain from which time has flowed. A new era was introduced by His presence in the world. A revolution, which is still going on, had its inception at His conception. The social strata was altered.

Literature found a new subject.

Music was given a new and higher note.

Art was colored.
Architecture was revolutionized.

The economic world was affected. The tills of the merchants and the deposits of department stores are ample evidence at this season of the year that His coming has had a material effect upon the world.

The culture of civilization was changed by Christ. His friends and enemies have all agreed that His coming transformed the thinking of mankind, either for weal or for woe.

The stream of civilization was transferred to a different channel by His coming. Gibbon, an agnostic and the author of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, listed the introduction of Christianity into the old Roman Empire as a major and contributing feature in the fall of Rome.

A familiar poem expresses this thought in a novel manner:

The Unique Christ

His birth was contrary to the laws of life,
His death was contrary to the laws of death;
He had no cornfields or fisheries,
But he could spread a table for five thousand
And have bread and fish to spare!
He walked on no beautiful carpets or velvet rugs,
But He walked on the waters of the Sea of Galilee
And they supported Him!
When He died, few men mourned,
But a black crepe was hung over the sun!
Though men trembled not for their sins,
The earth beneath them
Shook under the load!
All nature honored Him!
Corruption could not get hold of His body;
The soil that had been reddened with His blood
Could not claim His dust!
Three years He preached His gospel;
He wrote no book,
Built no church-house,
Had no monetary backing;
But after 1900 years
He is the one central character in human history,
The pivot around which
The events of the ages revolve,
And the only regenerator of the human race!
Was it merely the Son of Joseph and Mary
Who crossed the world's horizon 1900 years ago?
Was it merely human blood
That was spilled on Calvary's Hill

For the redemption of sinners?
What thinking man
Can keep from exclaiming,
My Lord and My God!

– Author Unknown

It may surprise you to hear that the Scripture does not treat His coming at Bethlehem as an isolated event. Although it is important, it is not considered out of proportion to other and comparable events. His coming was a step in the development of God’s plan for redemption of the world.

Actually, Bethlehem is *one* in a series of appearances of Christ into the world. It does not mark His first coming into the world. By the same token, it is not His last coming to the earth. In order to give full appreciation to Bethlehem, it is necessary to consider His other appearances in relationship to it. For a right perspective, there is need to view the maternity of the stable in the light of the eternity of heaven. It must be remembered that garments of glory were laid aside for swaddling clothes. The motherhood of the manger should be viewed in the light of the fatherhood of God.

In order to get the importance of His birth, let’s withdraw from Bethlehem and consider His coming there as just one event in the panorama of the ages. Let us consider this theme under the following divisions:

- (1) Before Bethlehem
- (2) Beginning at Bethlehem
- (3) Because of Bethlehem

Before Bethlehem

An abundance of Scripture supports the fact that Christ was before Bethlehem. He is just as real in the Old Testament as He is in the New Testament. The great difference, of course, is that *He became flesh*. He said, “Before Abraham was, I AM.” Also He said, “My Father worketh hitherto and I work.” He and the Father were working long before Bethlehem. John opened his matchless Gospel with this majestic statement:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. (John 1:1, 2)

The prophet Isaiah had made a very careful distinction about His birth at Bethlehem: “Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given.” The *Child* was born, but the *Son* was given, because He was before Bethlehem.

Micah, the contemporary of Isaiah, had said that He would come forth from Bethlehem but that His “goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting.”

His footprints were manifested in this world before the prints were made in His hands.

He appears in the first verse of the Bible – “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” The word for “God” in this passage is *Elohim*, which is plural. Without being technical, let me say that the Hebrews had a form of the noun which is called dual since it meant only two. When the plural was used without a number, the natural thought was that it was three –

the next number to the dual. As you see, there is the suggestion of the Trinity in the first verse of Genesis, and the part that He had in the creation is clearly stated in the following Scriptures:

All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made. (John 1:3)

For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him. (Colossians 1:16)

God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds.
(Hebrews 1:1, 2)

Not only is Christ referred to in the first verse of Genesis, but there also are many evidences of His presence throughout the Old Testament. There is a rather strange statement occurring in the record of the fall of man in the Garden of Eden:

And they heard the voice of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day: and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God amongst the trees of the garden. (Genesis 3:8)

This expression for God is rather unusual – “The voice of the LORD God.” Then, to add to the strangeness of the verse, it is stated that “the voice of the LORD God *walked* in the garden.” Now, it is most unusual to have a voice walking. It reminds us of the old bromide, “Did you ever see a board walk, or did you ever see a horse fly?” However, this statement is not so unusual when we discover that the Lord Jesus Christ identified Himself as the “alphabet of God.” He said, “I am Alpha and Omega.” He is further identified by John as the “Word of God.” As you know, words are formed from the alphabet. The voice is the word made articulate. The alphabet is translated into a word, and the word is energized into a voice. “The voice of the Lord God” was none other than the Lord Jesus Christ. This is not far-fetched, for it is in perfect harmony of Scripture when the mixed metaphor of Genesis chapter 3 is compared with the one in Revelation 1:12:

And I turned to see the voice that spake with me. And being turned, I saw seven golden candlesticks.

John said, “I turned to see the voice that spake with me.” There was a voice walking in the Garden of Eden, and John turned to see a voice on the Island of Patmos, and the voice on the Island of Patmos is identified as none other than the Lord Jesus Christ after His glorification. The voice of the Lord God in Genesis chapter 3, which Adam saw, and the voice of the Lord God in Revelation chapter 1, which John saw, are identical. Furthermore, the steps of the Lord Jesus Christ can be followed through the remainder of the Old Testament. The Angel of the Lord in the Old Testament is apparently none other than the Lord Jesus Christ of the New Testament. He was before Bethlehem.

It is a glorious tribute to Christ to measure time from His birth, but actually the expression “B.C.” is inaccurate. You cannot get before Christ in time. He stood on the threshold, when time began, as “The Ancient of Days.”

Beginning at Bethlehem

Bethlehem marked a mighty transition for the Lord Jesus Christ as well as for this earth. Something of eternal significance transpired there. Not only was the calendar of the world changed, but heaven itself and eternity were affected. It had been predicted,

...When he cometh into the world, he saith, Sacrifice and offering thou wouldst not, but a body hast thou prepared me. (Hebrews 10:5)

John stated the mystery of the incarnation – “The Word became flesh...” (John 1:14). That statement is the simplest and the shortest concerning the virgin birth.

In his first epistle, John marked off the entrance of Christ into the world as one of the three beginnings in Scripture. They are:

(1) The beginning of creation.

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. (Genesis 1:1)

(2) The beginning before all beginnings.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. (John 1:1)

(3) The beginning of the Christian era.

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life. (1 John 1:1)

In the new era which began with the coming of Christ, God was made “available” for humanity. John said, “We have heard Him; we have seen Him; we have looked upon Him; and we have handled Him.” This had its beginning with the virgin birth and was so stated by Dr. Luke:

...That holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God.
(Luke 1:35)

Christ came for a two-fold purpose. The first was to *reveal God*. The angel also said in Matthew, “. . . Thou shalt call his name Jesus: for he shall save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21). The second purpose was to *redeem man*. This Baby was born to die! Bethlehem was linked to Calvary by a blood tie!

Our Christ

I know not how Bethlehem's Babe
 Could in the Godhead be;
I only know the Manger-Child
 Has brought God's life to me.
I know not how that Calvary's Cross
 A world from sin could free;
I only know its Matchless Love
 Has brought God's love to me.
I know not how that Joseph's Tomb
 Could solve Death's mystery;
I only know the Living Christ –
 Our Immortality.

– Rev. Major Henry Webb Farrington

Calvary led to the empty tomb. The empty tomb was filled with the power of the resurrection. The empty tomb led to the ascension. It spoke of His glorification. The ascension led to the place of intercession where He is today – this very moment. This is what John meant in Revelation 1:19:

Write the things which thou hast seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall be hereafter.

The things that John saw in the first chapter of Revelation pertain to the glorified Christ:

- (1) He sits at God's right hand with all power committed to Him in heaven and in earth.
- (2) He is the head of the church.
- (3) His piercing eyes search out every heart and life.
- (4) His tender heart pleads for each that is His own.
- (5) His nail-pierced hands hold His sheep.

When John saw Him in all of His glory, the reaction on John was profound:

And when I saw him, I fell at his feet as dead. And he laid his right hand upon me, saying unto me, Fear not; I am the first and the last. (Revelation 1:17)

John's reaction is amazing in light of the fact that he had reclined upon the Lord's bosom in the Upper Room; now he lies as dead at the feet which are as "burnished brass." The Lord Jesus Christ is no longer the lowly Nazarene, the carpenter of Nazareth, or the man of Galilee. He is the man of glory – glorified.

All of these truths had their inception at Bethlehem. There He took upon Himself humanity; there He became the God-man:

But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death, crowned with glory and honour; that he by the grace of God should taste death for every man. For it became him, for whom are all things, and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons unto glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings. (Hebrews 2:9, 10)

Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; and deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage. For verily he took not on him the nature of angels; but he took on him the seed of Abraham. Wherefore in all things it behoved him to be made like unto his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people. For in that he himself hath suffered being tempted, he is able to succour them that are tempted. (Hebrews 2:14-18)

As man, Christ was humiliated – He tasted death for every man. As a man, He was glorified – “But we see Jesus...crowned with glory and honor.” The story did not begin at Bethlehem, and the story does not end there. Bethlehem leads on; the star of Bethlehem points on to “the Bright and Morning Star.”

Because of Bethlehem

Bethlehem brought Jesus down to us, but it has not brought us up to Him. He must come again in order to get us. The following words are His Christmas message to us today:

And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also. (John 14:3)

Christ became a baby at Bethlehem so that we will lose our babyhood when He comes again. He became like us at Bethlehem. We will become like Him when He comes again:

Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is. (1 John 3:2)

And that, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep; for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed. (Romans 13:11)

The Book of Revelation opens with this amazing statement –

“The Revelation of Jesus Christ...”

The word which is translated “Revelation” is *apokalupsis*. This is one of the three words which are commonly used in the New Testament for the second coming of Christ. The three words are:

(1) *Epiphaneia*. This means “shining in.” This word is used interchangeably for His first and second comings. In fact, His appearances in the Old Testament are an *epiphaneia*. His coming at Bethlehem is an *epiphaneia*, and His appearing for His church is called an *epiphaneia*. Paul used it for both the first coming and the second coming of Christ when he wrote Titus:

For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world; looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ. (Titus 2:11-13)

The first time that the word “appear” occurs, it refers to His coming at Bethlehem, and the second time it occurs, the Rapture is in view.

(2) *Parousia*. This word simply means “present.” It would be the answer that a soldier would give to roll call. This word could be used for either phase of the second coming of Christ. It is used when the apostles asked the Lord Jesus for a sign of His coming (Matthew 24:3). It speaks of both phases of His coming: first for His church, and second to the earth to establish His Kingdom. Paul used it for the former in 1 Corinthians 15:23, “...they that are Christ’s at his coming.”

(3) *Apokalupsis*. This means “unveiling.” This is the word that occurs in Revelation, and it is where the Book gets its name. This word is reserved for the full manifestation of Christ – at His coming in power and in glory to the earth.

There have been those who have maintained that this word could refer either to the Rapture or to His coming in glory. I spent some time in going over each one of these passages carefully and I am personally convinced that each time this word occurs it looks beyond the Rapture to the full manifestation of the Lord Jesus Christ.

In fact, one of the reasons that the Book of Revelation has been so misunderstood is because men have thought it was the unveiling of events that are in the future. It is not the unveiling of events but the unveiling of a Person who has not yet been seen in all of His glory and beauty. Today He is like a statue that has the veil put over it, awaiting the day when the veil shall be removed and He shall be seen in all of His glory.

There is no unveiling of the Lord Jesus Christ in the Old Testament, but He is there in shadow and in symbol. Actually, there was no unveiling at Bethlehem.

They all were looking for a King
To slay their foes and lift them high:
Thou cam’st, a little baby thing
That made a woman cry.
– George Mac Donald

It is not until you come to the Book of Revelation that you see the Lord Jesus Christ unveiled.

Again, may we call attention to something that needs to be corrected? The Book of Revelation is *not* a symbolic book. John actually saw the events take place, for they concern the full-orbed manifestation of the Lord Jesus Christ in all His pristine and regal glory.

The Book of Revelation sets before us a glorious Person, with the veil removed from Him, and with the veil removed from our eyes so that we may look upon Him and see with John –

...We beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:14)

In the Book of Revelation, the important things are:

- (1) The Judge – not judgments.
- (2) The Lamb – not the dragon.
- (3) The Rider on the white horse who has four names – not the four horsemen.
- (4) The Lion of the Tribe of Judah who is the center – not the beast out of the sea.
- (5) The bride of the Lamb is the one that we need to identify – not the harlot on the beast.

Christ is not a savior in His revelation; He is Sovereign. He is not a helpless babe; He is the omnipotent Man.

There are not merely a few shepherds present at His revelation, but a great multitude which no man could number out of every tribe and tongue and nation bowing to Him.

He is not a poor carpenter with no place to lay His head, but He is the King on the throne with the seven-sealed book of the title deeds of the earth in His hands.

He is not a newborn baby with chubby hands, but He is the Man with nail prints in His hands.

He is not in swaddling clothes, but He is in robes of glory.

Christ is the Great High Priest.

He is the Word of God.

He is Faithful and True.

He is the King of Kings and the Lords of Lords.

It is not just a star that marks Him now, but He is the One before whose presence the heavens will roll up as a scroll. Wise men brought gifts to a baby then, but He will be the Man of glory bringing rewards and gifts for His own. Bethlehem is only a glimpse of Christ. Bethlehem is a bird's-eye view of His glory. Bethlehem is looking through a glass darkly, but those who are His own look on to the Bright and Morning Star, and their prayers today cry out in a world that has rejected Him – “even so, come, Lord Jesus.”