

Child in the Manger: The True Meaning of Christmas

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A Brief Book Summary from TGC

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About the Author

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Overview

This book seeks to recover the true meaning of Christmas by understanding Old Testament prophecies of the coming of Christ along with the Christmas narratives in Matthew and Luke. It also explores the meaning of Christmas from the vantage points of Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, the Magi, and King Herod.

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Summary

Chapter 1

A Question, a Parable, and a Family Tree

George Square in Glasgow, Scotland has, through the years during Christmas time, been the location of a large Christmas tree and many Christmas lights. Walking through this square at Christmastime leads to a question and a parable. The question is, “what is the true meaning of Christmas?” It also leads to a parable because one year, the fake baby Jesus was stolen from the manger scene. The parable taken from that incident is that “We continue to wish for the blessings of Christmas; but we have lost the benefactor.”

The true meaning of Christmas can only be found by returning to the beginning, like Matthew does in his genealogy of Jesus. This essential genealogy is not boring, but rather gives us the big picture of God's saving plan which goes all the way back to Abraham. Christmas reveals that Jesus is the blessing of the nations that was promised to Abraham and the royal Son of David provided even after the rebellion which led to Israel's exile. The entire history which is painted in the genealogy finds its climax in the birth of Christ in Bethlehem, from Mary and with Joseph at her side.

However, initially for Joseph, the pregnancy meant that his hopes of marriage were dashed- he was not the father. Yet, in his grief, God sends an angel to tell him what is happening and now his whole life is rearranged with Christ at the center. The genealogy has moved from Abraham to David, David to the Exile, and the Exile to the birth. The final movement of God's redeeming action has begun with the arrival of Jesus, who is the dawning of the light of salvation. This, then, is the meaning of Christmas, "the Light of the world has come into the darkness of the world, in order to bring light into the darkness of our hearts, and to illumine them with the grace of forgiveness." God has kept his promises to Abraham, to David, and to the nations. Do you know, from your heart, the true meaning of Christmas?

Chapter 2

The Word Made Flesh

One of the largest claims of the gospel is that the Son of God took on human flesh in the incarnation, which we find explored in the prologue to John's gospel (1:1-4). First, in the prologue John takes the reader to a point before time where the Word of God has existed from all eternity and was present "in the beginning." Second, this word was also with God, or face-to-face with God eternally. Being 'with God' reveals that God the Son enjoy a deep intimacy with the God the Father from all eternity. Third, John explicitly claims that the Word was God who had 'life in himself.' Jesus himself knew and taught this about who he was which is why we cannot claim him as a great teacher if we deny his divinity. Fourth, this Word 'became flesh,' though he didn't cease to be God. In a world dominated by Greek philosophy and a dismissal of the body, this was a radical claim- "Salvation comes not by us being delivered from the body but through the Word becoming flesh and taking a body!" Lastly, this word 'dwelt among us.' Here, John uses language reminiscent of the Old Testament tabernacle, showing that God's glory now dwells bodily in Christ.

Uniquely, Jesus' glory is seen in his suffering, death, and resurrection. That Christ should leave his home in glory, and experience incarnation, humiliation, crucifixion, and resurrection, is his glory. John's gospel, which portrays Jesus as being on trial, provides two witnesses to this glory- John the Baptist and John the gospel writer. The gospel is thus establishing its claims to revealing Jesus' glory by providing these two witnesses. These witnesses declare that Jesus came, that he died for our sins, and that through him spiritual orphans can become children of God through the wonderful gift of grace in adoption.

Chapter 3

The Inside Story

Philippians 2 provides a heavenly perspective on Christmas which gives us ‘the inside story of Christmas.’ It reveals the central mindset of the Son by showing the pattern of his status in heaven, his descent to earth and suffering, and this his ascension. First, it reveals his presence and status in heaven- he was ‘in the form of God.’ The Greek word ‘*morphe*’ means ‘existing as’ or ‘possessing the status of,’ and Paul begins by stating that Jesus was fully and truly divine. It also says that he was in the *morphe* of a servant: “The Lord of all became the servant of all.” As a servant, he “did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped,” which means that “he did not insist on receiving dignity commensurate with his identity, or appeal to his divine status as a reason why he should not humble himself or taste humiliation.”

Second, the text says that Jesus ‘emptied himself.’ This does not mean that Jesus gave up his divinity, but that he poured himself out for us and in doing so revealed the deepest truth about himself. This emptying climactically took place with his death on the cross. That cross reveals that “He came from heaven’s highest glory to the Roman Empire’s greatest obscenity and the Bible’s deepest ignominy. Such is his love for us.”

While the text reveals the mindset of Jesus, it also reveals the mind of the Father. First, the Father exalts the Son, then he gives him the name that is above all names- Jesus, and then promised that all will bow their knees to him. The Father’s greatest desire “is to see his Son exalted.” If there was any other way to save sinners, other than through the humiliation and exaltation of Christ, the Father would reveal it. But there isn’t. Only in Christ do we have access to the Father.

There is also a third mindset mentioned in this text and that is the mindset of the believer. By being united to Christ and receiving new life by faith, we also come to share in his mindset and begin to count others as more significant than ourselves. Paul even illustrates how the gospel works itself out in our hearts and lives by pointing to Timothy and Epaphroditus, selfless workers for the gospel. As we, by grace, grow in considering others as more important than ourselves, it shows that our hearts have understood the true meaning of Christmas.

Chapter 4

Immanuel

Is the message of Christmas simply ‘communal wishful thinking?’ The secular world desires world peace, but this is not the meaning of Christmas. Jesus came that we might have peace with God and this was brought about through the promises and coming of Jesus as “Immanuel” (Is. 7:14). While “God with us” is a constant theme through the Old Testament, what makes Isaiah’s prediction remarkable is that the promise will be fulfilled in a child born of a virgin.

As Isaiah prophesied, he came to see that Israel’s physical exile and bondage was the “outer shell of a deeper exile and bondage in sin.” Deliverance could only come through atonement. Here, Isaiah introduces the ‘Wonderful Counselor’ who would shed spiritual light into our inner darkness, revealing our true condition and pointing sinners to the remedy. Ultimately, this Wonderful Counselor is Jesus, who himself gives another Counselor, the Holy Spirit. This Spirit has given us the gift of Scripture for teaching, reproof, correction, and training (2 Tim. 3:16). Yet, our natural hearts resist this light (Rom. 1:18-32) and suppress this knowledge. “We pretend

that to ourselves and to others that all is well when in fact all is ultimately lost.” Only in Christ, our Wonderful Counselor, and by the power of the Spirit, can His light shine into our hearts and give us new light and tell us where more light is to be found.

Chapter 5

Bad News- Good News (Immanuel Part Two)

The bad news is that we suffer from more than just darkness and that we deserve God’s justice. “The good news is that the Wonderful Counsellor is also called Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”

Jesus is Mighty God. We not only lack light, but we also lack power because we are dead in sin. Immanuel as Mighty God has all the power to bring us to live and free us from sin. Interestingly, Isaiah claims that Immanuel will rescue his people “as on the day of Midian,” (9:4). Just as God defeated an overwhelming army by using only very few soldiers in the story of Gideon (Judges 6-7), so God will deliver sinners from guilt and the power of sin through Immanuel being born as a child and dying on a cross. Isaiah also says ‘the government shall be on his shoulders.’ The early church was correct in seeing that Jesus entered into his reign through means of the cross of Calvary. “In him the power of God is manifested through weakness, and the wisdom of God is demonstrated through the foolishness of the cross.”

Immanuel is also the ‘Everlasting Father’ which implies that we are, by nature, spiritually homeless and orphans. As a king was considered the father of a nation, so the reigning king Immanuel is a father through whom we are adopted into the family of God. In the story of the prodigal father (Luke 15), the father absorbs all the shame of the prodigal son. If we deny the Father, like Marx and Freud do, and claim that this is only a ‘projection’ of a desire for a good father, we not only “deny the truth about ourselves but we demean ourselves.” Immanuel came so that orphans might know the goodness of this Father and be adopted into this family. By experiencing alienation from the Father on the cross, Jesus cures our hearts of their fundamental homesickness.

Last, Immanuel is the Prince of Peace who gives us assurance that God’s judgment for our sin has been dealt with by him becoming the Suffering Servant on the cross.

Chapter 6

The Burden

It is possible that Mary herself is the eyewitness behind Luke’s account of Christmas. While we know little about her, we do know some things. She was likely young, maybe thirteen or fourteen years old, came from a family of real believers, loved God, and she also loved the Scriptures. Her songs in Luke are radically saturated with quotes of and allusions to the Old Testament. Even Jesus’ name echoed Old Testament realities. Joshua was supposed to give Israel rest, but the rest won was incomplete. Rest was a pattern in the original creation, it was promised to Israel in general and David in particular, and awaited Israel when they returned from exile. Only Jesus, the child born of Mary, could provide ultimate rest.

Yet Mary, without unbelief, questions, “How?” How will she give birth to a son though she is a virgin? Though the actual birth would be a very natural event, Jesus’ conception was absolutely supernatural, brought about by the ministry of the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:35). But must one believe in the Virgin Birth to be a Christian? A few things should be kept in mind: first, Matthew and Mark both focus on the virgin birth; second, the conception of Jesus in Mary’s womb was a supernatural, miraculous event; third, the birth of Jesus was not the first time someone fully human was created in a special way (think of Adam and Eve). So, while Scripture sees the conception of Jesus as unique, it doesn’t portray it as “outside the context of other ways in which God has shown the greatness of his power.” While all the above is true and incredibly important, it must also be kept in mind that many, through Paul’s, Peter’s, and others preaching came to faith in Christ through the gospel which may not have included knowledge of the virgin birth.

So the question must be asked differently: “Is it possible to know the New Testament’s testimony to the Virgin Conception specifically and actually deny it, and continue to claim to be a Christian?” The virgin conception is taught in the only contemporary testimonies to Jesus we have, Scripture claims that all things are possible with God, and the Apostle’s taught that Jesus’ earthly life began and ‘ends’ with a supernatural work of God. So how could you not believe it? Thus, to “consciously, persistently deny the Virgin Conception and Birth eventually makes it psychologically impossible with any intellectual *consistency* to trust the teaching of God’s word.”

If this is the case, perhaps we’ll ask “why?” Why the virgin birth? It confirms that Jesus is the very Son of God. It shows, through the Spirit ‘hovering over her’ as he did the original creation (Luke 1:35), that a new creation is beginning with the presence of Christ. The virgin birth is also the most appropriate way for him to come; no other ways are theologically viable. Lastly, the virgin birth confirms what Scripture elsewhere makes clear: we cannot save ourselves.

Chapter 7

Naming the Baby

Joseph was told that the conception of Mary’s child was “the supernatural work of the Spirit of God.” He was also told that the baby should be named ‘Jesus’ and given the explanation that the baby would eventually ‘save his people from their sins,’ (Matt. 1:21). Being told this name and explanation clearly shows that God had planned Jesus’ destiny in advance. Though completely free and totally responsible, Jesus was predestined to die for the sins of those given to him by the Father.

Naming Jesus, then, was an act of faith by Joseph. In the midst of his earlier confusion and disappointment, Joseph “trusted God’s word, rested in his sovereign providence, and in a sense he also committed himself to trusting the Saviour.” Like an Old Testament prophet, Joseph didn’t know everything, but he believed what was revealed to him.

As Jesus ministered to others, we see that his name is a perfect fit. He not only saved people from the crippling effects of sin, but also dealt with sin itself- its dominion and power- on the cross. Jesus came to save, that is why he was given that name. Do you call him by that name? Does it mean everything to you? Will you allow him to transform your life?

Chapter 8

The First Nowell

At the first Christmas, an entire army of angels appeared to shepherds. Shepherds were “the lowest of the low” in that culture and it is striking that these angels chose them as their audience. Interestingly, these shepherds would go “to Bethlehem, the home town of David who became the *shepherd-king*.”

Luke’s account begins with bad news. Caesar Augustus called for taxes which was bad news for everyone. But then the good news comes- a new Savior-King was being born. This conflict between kingdoms climaxed in the coming of Christ but had existed since Adam and Eve were exiled from Eden. One decree was taxes and a ruler was taking from the people; another decree came which announced good news of a Savior being given to the people.

Yet, the shepherd’s first response was fear. This isn’t unique to the shepherds but is also found in the Western world and in every heart. There is a fear of and hostility towards any announcement of a king other than ourselves entering the world. The gospel also brings another kind of fear to the natural heart- “It arises because the gospel that promises eternal life also calls for the sacrifice of our own lives to Christ.”

But the shepherds are told not to fear. Unlike a normal birth announcement that says “to these parents are born this child,” this announcement says, “*to you* a child is born.” This announcement comes with a sign that will seal and confirm the words spoken- they will find a baby in a manger (Luke 2:12). Just as he was found by the shepherds wrapped in linen and placed in a borrowed manger, later in Luke’s gospel Jesus will be bound in linen and placed in a borrowed tomb. As the shepherds raised sheep that would be used for Israel’s temple sacrifices, they will see the Christmas child, Jesus, who will be the Lamb slain for the sins of the world.

This is why the angels could announce peace when they saw the shepherds. Rather than being peace “among those with whom [God] is pleased,” a better translation is that they announced peace to “those who are recipients of God’s gracious favor.” This news was so great, the shepherds shared it with others and we get to hear that news every Christmas.

Chapter 9

The Long Journey

This chapter discusses the Magi who came to see Jesus who were “several cuts above the social class of the shepherds.” They were the scientists, wealthy and scholarly, of their day who believed that cosmic forces governed the universe, so when the new star was seen, they thought it meant the arrival of a new king. They were more than likely from the area of Babylon in Persia and had heard rumors ever since the reign of Nebuchadnezzar around Daniel’s time (see Daniel 2, 7), about a star that would rise and lead to the finding of a new king. Their journey, they thought, would take them to a city and a palace but this was mistaken logic. It was God’s revelation in Scripture (Micah 5:2) that told them that they would find the king not in a city or palace, but in lowly Bethlehem.

The Magi made a mistake in assuming by their own reason that a new king would be found in a palace but Herod's scholars were equally mistaken. God's word hadn't changed their prideful and cold hearts, even though they studied it so much. Even these bible scholars missed that the new King would be found in humility- a "borrowed stable, borrowed manger, borrowed cross, borrowed tomb." If Jesus came in humility, only those who humble themselves will find him. Thus, the Magi humbled themselves, bowed before and worshipped this child, and gave him gifts. It is only after we recognize that Jesus is God's gift of salvation given to us that "the only thing we want to do is give ourselves to him forever." The journey of the Magi encourages us to go on our own journey to find the true meaning of Christmas: "seeking, finding, trusting, and worshipping the Lord Jesus Christ."

Chapter 10

Post-Christmas Stress Syndrome

While the Christmas season can cause stress for everyone, it create a unique stress for king Herod. When the Magi announced the arrival and birth of a new king, Herod was "deeply troubled." Even though he claimed to be the king of the Jews, he was probably of Edomite descent. For him, this new gospel message meant either surrender or attack and he chose the latter. Herod isn't unique. God's kingdom is a threat to us losing our own kingdoms that we have in our hearts.

Not only was Herod troubled by the coming of a new king and kingdom, but he was deceptive and hypocritical as well. He pretended to be interested in the new king to the Magi's so that he could worship this new child, but instead he was really seeking to eradicate the newly born king. Herod was even willing to embrace the 'collateral damage' of all the young boys being killed in Bethlehem if that mean the uniquely born new king was dead too. "When presented with the message of Christ the King we must either yield or begin to find ways of defending ourselves against his perceived threat to our lives." As deceit becomes our defense, we increasingly suppress the truth and our hearts become dark and our thinking futile (Rom. 1). In God's sovereign providence, Herod's plan to kill Jesus failed.

Yet, the coming of Christ did cause many children to lose their lives. Why would God allow that? We must make a distinction between correlation and causation. Jesus' birth is correlated to that tragedy but it didn't cause it- Herod caused the tragedy. We must be reminded that we don't understand God's ways, they are far above our finite and fallen understanding but we do know that "In the new King all who sorrow and mourn and feel pain and injustice can find hope." Not only at Christmas, but especially at the cross, are we reminded that though we don't know God's ways, we do know that he is loving and cares.

Herod's conflict with the new king is part of a larger story of conflict that began in Genesis 3. At Christmas, the seed of the woman has finally arrived to crush the head of the serpent. A heavenly perspective of this reality is given in Revelation 12 as the great dragon seeks to destroy the woman and her child. In the end, one must compare Herod's present kingdom, which is nothing, with Christ's kingdom, which is global.

So, if this Christmas we are looking for Jesus, where should we go, Bethlehem? No, we need to go to the living Christ in heaven, by faith. There we will find the Savior who was wrapped in linen and laid in a manger, who was later wrapped in linen and laid in tomb, who was later resurrected and ascended to the right hand of the Father. That is where we will find him.