

## The Inside Story

Emmanuel – Part I

Luke 2:1-5

### Introduction

If you had been alive nearly two hundred years ago, the spotlight of concern and interest in your world would have been centered on a man named Napoleon. As the most powerful man in Europe, he was in the process of conquering the western world. One author tweaked my historical perspective when he wrote,

*If Dan Rather had been living in 1809, his evening news broadcast would have concentrated on Austria . . . not America. Nothing else was half as significant on the international scene.<sup>i</sup>*

He is right. If you had been alive in 1809, you would have considered Napoleon's battles in Austria as the most significant thing happening in the civilized world. The last place you would have ever thought about as significant or important, would have been the back woods of Kentucky. Yet, in 1809, a poor, illiterate, wandering laborer and his wife delivered a newborn boy named Abraham Lincoln.

Who would have cared about that birth in 1809, however? In fact, the destiny of the world was in the hands of a French dictator and emerging world ruler, named Napoleon . . . or was it?! In that same year, the birth of a boy in Hardin County, Kentucky, was insignificant in the shaping of world empires . . . or was it?!

If you had been alive two thousand years ago, the news sensation of the day would have been the empire of Rome and the emerging world leader. After defeating Antony and Cleopatra's bid for the

throne of Rome, he solidified the Roman empire and became its first true emperor.

His given name was Gaius Octavian. But after assuming the throne of his deceased great uncle, Julius Caesar, he also assumed the title of Caesar. Caesar was simply a term like "emperor," or "pharaoh;" a generic title given to the emperor. And, for the first time in the four hundred year old kingdom of Rome, the Roman senate voted to give Caesar Octavian the title of Augustus. Augustus meant, "revered or holy," and, until this time, it had been a title reserved exclusively for the gods.

Two thousand years ago, the belief was established that the Roman Caesar was the son of the gods. The sensation of that day was the ruler of the greatest empire known to man, and his name was Caesar Augustus. Historians have said that Caesar Augustus was probably Rome's greatest leader. They say that he came to lead Rome when it was made of bricks, but, when he died, Rome was made of marble. So revered was he by his empire that an inscription has been discovered in the Roman city of Halicarnassus that referred to him as, "the savior of the world".

If you had been alive two thousand years ago, the spotlight would have never shifted to the back hills of Nazareth. No one would have ever thought to look at a baby, born to peasant parents in Bethlehem, as having any significance or influence over the future of the world.

That birth would be ignored entirely by Rome. And why not? Compare the birth of this peasant boy, who would claim to be the Son of God, with Caesar

Augustus of Rome, who was also declared to be the son of god. Who would you think had a better chance of being believed? Which “savior of the world” would you have followed?

The prophet Isaiah said of Christ, in chapter 53, verses 2b and 3b,

*. . . He has no . . . majesty that we should look upon Him . . . He was despised and we did not esteem Him.*

That is another way of saying, “We looked at Him and never would have guessed in a million years that He was anything important.”

Caesar Augustus, on the other hand, looked like a son of god ought to look. And, behind him was all the splendor and wealth of Rome!

What was behind Jesus Christ? The poverty and lowliness of the lowest class. He did not look anything like a Son of God!

Why would Jesus come to earth in the way that He did? Why did He come in poverty? I want to explore how and why, in several discussions, as we celebrate His birth during the Christmas season.

## **Jesus – From Riches To Rags**

Paul wrote in his second letter to the Corinthian believers, these words about Jesus Christ, in chapter 8, verse 9,

*. . . though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich.*

Note the key phrase, “for your sake He became poor”. There were two predominant words that were translated “poor” in the Greek world. One word referred to someone who had just enough money to pay his bills and buy his food. After he paid his debts and bought enough food to survive, he was then out of money; he was poor until his next paycheck.

Does that sound like you, especially at this time of the year? Christmas is expensive, isn’t it? Anyone who says Christmas does not last all year, does not have a credit card!

There is another word that is translated “poor”. It is the Greek word, “ptochos,” which referred to someone who never had any money. This was the person who could not pay his bills and did not have any money for food. He was living in abject poverty; totally impoverished. He never ran out of money, simply because he did not have any to run out of. He had none to spend, save, or even lose.

This second word was the one Paul used in this verse to the Corinthians. This was the kind of poor person that Jesus Christ became.

When Paul wrote that verse, he was thinking of the entirety of the incarnation as one act. In other words, Paul was saying, “For your sakes, the totality of the event of Christ becoming man, was impoverishment. It was choosing abject poverty.”

Now that is going from riches to rags. Why did He do it?

Paul answered in II Corinthians, chapter 8, verse 9, by saying, “He became impoverished, so that we could become enriched.”

In other words, He went from riches to rags so that we could go from rags to riches. He came from heaven to earth, so that we could go from earth to heaven.

## **The Inside Story**

Please travel back with me, to the days just before the Son of God was born on planet earth; to the time just before He became Emmanuel, which means, “God with us”. We are given the “inside story”. It begins in Matthew, chapter 1. Turn there and notice verse 18.

*Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: when His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit.*

You need to understand the shocking significance of what we just read. The Jewish marriage had several parts to it. The betrothal period, or the “kidusheem,” was the engagement period, which was followed by the marriage ceremony.

The betrothal period was a time when the young couple went before the priest and declared their vows. They would then live apart for one year, as the young man prepared his home for the bride. According to the custom of their day, you could not break the betrothal period without a written divorce. In fact, the law of this day held that, if the man died before the wedding ceremony, his betrothed would be considered a widow.

At this point in the story, this verse in Matthew is filled with tragedy for young Joseph. Can you imagine the shock that the words,

*. . . before they came together she was found to be with child . . .*

brought to Joseph?

In other words, she informed Joseph that she was carrying a child – and it was not his! No doubt she told him about the angel; no doubt she tried to explain that there was not another man. But Joseph did not buy it. Notice the next verse,

***And Joseph her husband, being a righteous man and not wanting to disgrace her, planned to send her away secretly.***

The Law declared, in Deuteronomy, that Mary could be stoned to death. She had violated the marriage covenant and she could be tried publicly and found guilty.

Undoubtedly, by this time, the Jews were not carrying out the penalty of the Law. However, we do know that, during the time of Christ, a woman like Mary, could have been cast off by her family and ostracized from ever entering the temple again. The fact that we never really hear about Mary's parents may mean that this was exactly what happened.

The text tells us that Joseph was a righteous man, which means that he valued the Law; he lived a moral life. Joseph upheld the Law of God and respected holy living. Mary had obviously sinned. But he loved her, so, while Joseph chose not to publicly humiliate her, he chose not to marry her either.

Now continue to verses 20 to 23.

***But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins." Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Behold, the virgin shall be with child and shall bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel," which translated means, "God with us."***

By the way, to spell the name "Immanuel" with an "I," is to transliterate the name from the Hebrew. To spell it with an "E," is to transliterate it from the Greek. You will need to know that for the test!

Can you imagine Joseph's surprise at having this angelic visitor? The poor guy has gone through a lot in the last few hours. Now he discovers that Mary's story is true. This thing about God and angels and a Holy Spirit conception was not a fabrication by Mary. It was all true! But who would believe it?!

The truth is, hardly anyone would believe it! Joseph would, however. Notice verses 24 and 25.

***And Joseph arose from his sleep and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took Mary as his wife, but kept her a virgin until she gave birth to a Son; and he called His name Jesus.***

By the way, by obeying God, Joseph was giving his righteous reputation away for good. What I mean by that is, his only chance for clearing his name of fornication would have been to prove that Mary had been unfaithful to the betrothal vows. Now, however, to marry her would imply to everyone that he was the child's father; that he and Mary had violated their betrothal covenant of purity before God.

Do you remember that thirty years later, according to John, chapter 8, verse 41, Jesus will be confronted by Jewish leaders who challenge Him by saying,

... ***"We were not born in fornication . . ."***

That rumor never did die! And one of the accusations against Christ was that He had been an illegitimate child. For the rest of their lives, Joseph and Mary lived under the penalty and discomfort of obedience.

What are you willing to suffer in order to be obedient? Are you willing to accept the penalty of Christianity; the discomforts of obeying God?

## **The Continuing Story**

With that, Matthew jumps ahead nearly two years in the story. It is Luke, the doctor, who fills in all the details of the labor and delivery room in Bethlehem. Luke, chapter 2, picks up the story of Emmanuel. Notice verses 1 and 2.

***Now in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth. This was the first census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria.***

Caesar ordered this census for two reasons:

- The first reason, historians inform us, was to determine the number of military aged men there were in the kingdom. This would allow him to draft any number of men at any time he chose.
- The second reason, which was more important to Caesar, was for financial

purposes. This was a registration for the purpose of taxation.

All the inhabitants of Rome, whether Jew or Gentile, were to go to the town of their lineage and register their name, their occupation, their children's names and so forth.

These were days when it seemed like Caesar Augustus was in control of the events of the world. However, nothing could be further from the truth.

Augustus was God's errand boy. He delivered a decree at precisely the right moment. If he had made the decree three months earlier or three months later, then Mary's delivery would have taken place in Nazareth.

God was orchestrating everything to fulfill His sovereign will and His eternal Word. The Word of God had prophesied that:

- the Redeemer would be a human being – Genesis 3:15;
- the Savior would be a Jew, not a Gentile – Genesis 12:1-3;
- the Savior would come from the tribe of Judah – Genesis 49:10;
- the Messiah would be a descendant of David – II Samuel 7:1-17;
- the Messiah would be born of a virgin – Isaiah 7:14;
- the Redeemer would be crucified and His clothing divided among the soldiers – Psalm 22; and,
- the Savior of the world would be born in the town of Bethlehem – Micah 5:2.

Turn to Micah, chapter 5. Micah prophesied that the Savior would be born in the town of Bethlehem hundreds of years before the birth of Christ. Look at verse 2.

***But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, too little to be among the clans of Judah, . . .***

(in other words, too insignificant to be on the map),

***. . . from you [Bethlehem] One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, [even] from the days of eternity.***

It might look like Caesar was calling the shots. It might look like Mary and Joseph were helpless pawns who were caught in the movements of world

history. In reality, however, every move was perfectly timed and directed by the hand of God.

So, Luke records for us, in verses 3 through 5 of chapter 2,

***And everyone was on his way to register for the census, each to his own city. Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David, in order to register along with Mary, who was engaged to him, and was with child.***

Notice that Mary was not going to stay behind. Joseph was not about to say, as one author wrote, "Listen, I have a business trip to make. You might have the Son of God while I'm away. I'll hurry home."

By the way, the name "Bethlehem" literally means, "the house of bread". In John, chapter 6, verse 35, Jesus is called "the bread of life". Can you imagine a better town for "the bread of life" to be born than a town which has a name that means "the house of bread"?

In addition to that, Bethlehem was the same town where the patriarch Jacob buried his wife Rachel, after she died in childbirth. And, the fields that Mary and Joseph passed by were the same fields where Ruth had once gathered wheat, until she was noticed by Boaz. This is the same little village where a shepherd boy, named David, tended the family sheep, before he was chosen to be the next king of Israel.

These were the relatives of Joseph and Mary. Had there been a throne in Jerusalem; had there been a king and queen in the land of Israel, it would have been Joseph and Mary. They were the descendants of both lines – from David through Solomon and from David through Nathan. Joseph and Mary were the rightful successors to the throne.

This lineage means that the son of Joseph and Mary would be the rightful prince of David! However, the world did not even notice. It was enraptured with the significance of mighty Rome, not the insignificance of little Bethlehem.

In a recent book, author Philip Yancey contrasted the humility that characterized Jesus' coming to earth with the typical visit by the royal family to another country.

*In London, looking toward the auditorium's royal box where the queen sat, I caught glimpses of the way rulers stride through the world: with bodyguards, and a*

*trumpet fanfare and a flourish of bright clothes and flashing jewelry. Queen Elizabeth II recently visited the United States, and reporters revealed all the behind the scenes details and logistics for such a visit to take place. Four thousand pounds of luggage contained more than you'd ever think imaginable. Her luggage contained two outfits for every occasion; a mourning outfit in case someone died and she needed to attend the funeral. She brought along her own hairdresser, two valets and dozens of other attendants. Carefully kept within her luggage were forty pints of plasma in case of a medical emergency. Even a brief visit of royalty to a foreign country can cost upwards of twenty million dollars.*

*In contrast, the Son of God – true royalty, traveled to earth without any of the amenities of first class – landing in an animal shelter, with no attendants present, nowhere to lay the King without borrowing the feed trough from the indifferent animals that shared their hay that night with their creator.*

Why did He give up His royal rights? Why did He give all of His privileges away? So that He could give us the greatest privilege of all. As we are told in John, chapter 1, verse 12a,

***But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God . . .***

Emmanuel, “God with us,” so that we, one day, could be with God. Though He was rich, He became totally impoverished, so that, through His poverty, we might become rich.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 12/2/2001 by Stephen Davey.

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<sup>i</sup> Charles R. Swindoll, Growing Strong In The Seasons Of Life (Portland, OR, Multnomah Press, 1983), p. 34.