

Adventuring With God

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The Surprising Entrance of the Savior

When Jesus came, the circumstances of His birth couldn't have been more wrong ... from the world's perspective. From all appearances, He was born illegitimately (see the Pharisees' accusation in John 8:41) to parents who had nothing to recommend them to God for such an outstanding assignment (John 6:42)—they were poor, simple people from a town with a less-than-favorable reputation (John 1:46). Even His lineage (in Matthew 1 and Luke 3) wasn't pristine by Hebrew standards. Some of the people listed, like Rahab, were unlikely choices for the Messiah's ancestry.

Because of a pagan government's decree, Mary, Jesus' mother, had to travel some eighty miles in her last stage of pregnancy. When she and Joseph arrived in Bethlehem, no cozy accommodation awaited her. She couldn't even stay in the local inn, as it was full of other visitors. So Mary and Joseph holed up in a dirty stable inhabited only by animals. The feeding trough (manger) was the only available bed for this special baby.

Some dignity seems to be restored to the situation by the arrival of wise men from the East, who present the Christ child with costly gifts that foretell His appointed role as King of the Jews. However, they arrive on the scene months, maybe even years, later. (Their arrival was no doubt timed to provide Joseph and Mary the resources necessary to flee into Egypt with Jesus to escape the slaughter of infants ordered by King Herod.)

According to Scripture, the only outside witnesses to the birth of Jesus were shepherds watching over sheep in nearby fields. They were visited by an angel, telling them that a Savior had been born that night in Bethlehem. The shepherds wasted no time, rushing into town to see for themselves, but seemingly no one else in town was aware of the awesome event taking place right under their noses.

We've heard the story of Jesus' birth so often, I'm sure it's lost some of its wonder and significance. The most precious human being ever born entered the world in complete obscurity. The only ones in attendance were His exhausted and inexperienced parents, some smelly shepherds fresh in from the field, and a few barn animals. Even the angels didn't show—after their "Glory to God in the highest" appearance to the shepherds, they went back to heaven. The highly unusual circumstances suggest that God designed them to teach us something about the kind of kingdom He was ushering in.

No one would have been surprised if the angelic announcement had been made to the religious elite of the day or the royal rulers of the region. After all, they were the movers and shakers, the ones who could make a difference in spreading Jesus' fame to those below them. But a top-down hierarchy wasn't what God was seeking. Since pride is man's number one problem, God made sure that the Savior would reach out first to the lowly, the despised, and the weak. No one from any part of the world would be able to complain that he was too poor or insignificant to be included in the *"good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people"* (Luke 2:10).

In 1 Corinthians 1 Paul reminds the believers of this. *"Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things ... so that no one may boast before him"* (vv. 26-29).

Jesus' kingdom would attract what the world despised—the weak, the lowly, the obscure, and the needy. How appropriate, since

Isaiah had prophesied concerning Jesus some 700 years before He was born: *"He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not"* (Isaiah 53:2-3).

I'm slow to learn this. Often I still act like I think God needs the best the world has to offer to accomplish His will. I find myself embarrassed at times by the lack of polish among God's representatives, especially when they draw the scorn of the world's spokesmen. I forget that He most often chooses to use the less than sophisticated to show that His wisdom and glory aren't dependent upon the vessels who carry them. In fact, His glory is most obvious in vessels that have nothing to boast about on their own.

Those like the Pharisees, whose religious knowledge should have helped them see spiritual reality, were the ones who would be left in darkness, while those who seemed too ignorant and common to the worldly wise would receive spiritual enlightenment through the revelation of God's Spirit. Jesus rejoiced in this fact: *"I praise you, Father, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure"* (Matthew 11:25-26).

Jesus' birth shouts a very important message to us: An inauspicious beginning does not doom one to spiritual insignificance. *Under God's hand* (and this is the most important qualifying condition), the most lowly and despised vessel can become a vessel of honor, radiantly displaying God's awesome power and glory. Though we may feel our lives are insignificant

and lack the gifts needed to attract the world's attention, under God's direction we can play a vital role in advancing His kingdom. The shepherds show us that our response is what pleases God. Their faith in Him was more important than their social status. When they heard the announcement concerning Christ's birth, they believed and obeyed. We can do the same, no matter who we are and where we come from.

Jesus began His time on earth with little to recommend Him to the worldly leaders. But through His submission to His Father, He gained a name *"that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow ... and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of the Father"* (Philippians 2:9-11). What a surprising turn of events!

This Christmas, let's rejoice with Mary as we think about the unique characteristics of God's kingdom... *"My spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me – holy is his name. He has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty."* (Luke 1:47-49, 51-53)

How surprising!
How glorious!

"O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie!
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by.
Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light;
The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.

"How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given!
So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of His heaven.
No ear may hear His coming, but in this world of sin,
Where meek souls will receive Him still, the dear Christ enters in."

Phillips Brooks, 1868