

## Christmas '03

Matthew 1:18-25 (NIV) *18 This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. 19 Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. 20 But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." 22 All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: 23 "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel"--which means, "God with us." 24 When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. 25 But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.*

We have been working our way through the gospel of Matthew. As this is the Sunday before Christmas, we will return to the story of the birth of Jesus. One thing we have noticed in Matthew is that Jesus is our example in all things. You might ask how His birth could be an example to us? Certainly, none among us was born of a virgin. None among us has come to redeem the world. None of us comes from eternity with the Father to reveal what had been kept a mystery. These things are unique to Jesus of Nazareth.

Let us first consider the big picture that night that the light shone in the darkness and forever changed this world. In millenniums past, God decided to make man in His image. He set him in a wonderful environment and asked him to care for it. Knowing that love is not love unless it is freely given, God gave man a chance to express his love through worshipful obedience or turn away in rebellion. There was only one rule: Don't eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

Enter Lucifer. Knowing that love is not love unless it is tested, God allowed Lucifer to rebel. He was one of the most magnificent creatures of all God's creation (Ezekiel 28:12-15). Many believe he led heaven in worshipping Almighty God. A wicked desire sprang in his heart to take the place of God and receive the worship of God's creations for himself. Since God no longer allowed him to continue in his lofty position in heaven, he decided to frustrate the plans of God. He would try to steal the worship of man on earth (Isaiah 14:12-14). Thus began a cosmic battle that has raged over the souls of men from the first man, Adam, to this very day. Who will we worship? (Joshua 24:15)

He first attacked Eve with suggestions that implied that God was not forthright. He implied that God had an agenda of deception and fear (Genesis 3:1-5). Satan's treachery was able to seduce Eve into disobedience. She in turn led Adam astray.

**Commented [notes1]:** 12 "Son of man, take up a lament concerning the king of Tyre and say to him: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: ""You were the model of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty.

13 You were in Eden, the garden of God; every precious stone adorned you: ruby, topaz and emerald, chrysolite, onyx and jasper, sapphire, turquoise and beryl. Your settings and mountings were made of gold; on the day you were created they were prepared.

14 You were anointed as a guardian cherub, for so I ordained you. You were on the holy mount of God; you walked among the fiery stones.

15 You were blameless in your ways from the day you were created till wickedness was found in you.

Ezek 28:12-15 (NIV)

**Commented [notes2]:** 13 You said in your heart, "I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly, on the utmost heights of the sacred mountain.

14 I will ascend above the tops of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High."

Isaiah 14:13-14 (NIV)

**Commented [notes3]:** 15 But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD."

Josh 24:15 (NIV)

**Commented [notes4]:** 1 Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden?'"

2 The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden,

3 but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.'"

4 "You will not surely die," the serpent said to the woman.

5 "For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

Gen 3:1-5 (NIV)

The image of God was marred. Satan took dominion from Adam and rights to the splendor of the kingdoms of man (Matthew 4:8-9). Every man descended from Adam was born with a nature inclined toward Lucifer's treachery and selfishness. Communion with God was marred, and a curse followed. Now, man must pay the consequence for treason. That consequence is death.

In the midst of all this treachery and loss of relationship came a glorious promise. "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel." Genesis 3:15 (NIV) One day, the offspring of the woman would crush the head of the serpent. He had stolen the dominion of the earth from Adam, but God promised that authority (head) would one day be crushed.

As we read the stories of individuals in the Bible, we see the battle rage. Though it seems that man has no hope or power, the placing of trust in God brings man to a place of restored relationship. (Psalms 32:5-7) (Genesis 15:6) (Hebrews 11:5-6) The struggle in our lives boils down to a decision to trust in God alone or some other source. Since Satan has dominion over the earth, all other sources are worship of him in disguise! (Matthew 6:24) He is getting what he started the rebellion for, worship. Individuals like Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Joseph, and Moses, seem to have come to a place of trust in God, placing the victory in God's omnipotent hands. See Hebrews 11. They stand out as those who broke free from the oppressive tyranny of the control of sin over their lives and became worshippers of God. They weren't perfect, but something about them was radically altered. To some of these, God reiterated His promise of a coming child that would deliver the world.

God made a relationship with an entire nation, calling them to be a people that would demonstrate to the world a total trust in God and worship and service to Him alone. (Deuteronomy 6:13) The promise of that special offspring ran through the line of a great king of Israel, David. Imperfect as he was, and imperfect as the nation was, God would not break His promises.

The prophets foretold of the downfall of the nation of Israel. They reminded them that they were not fulfilling their side of the agreement they made with God. They were not placing their trust in God, but had turned to those other gods and through them worshiped Lucifer. Yet, the prophets began to tell of the details of the life of the coming child that would bring God a mighty victory in this ancient battle. They foretold of that He would be the eternal King with an eternal kingdom.

Details of the coming King's life began to emerge. The place of His birth (Micah 5:2), the place of His ministry (Isaiah 9:1-2), and even the time and place of His death were foretold (Dan 9:24-26). The promises included amazing things like the end of sin, the healing of all afflictions, and bringing in everlasting righteousness.

Meanwhile, the nation was miraculously restored from captivity and awaited the birth of this child. Women prayed to be the one to become the mother of the

**Commented [notes5]:** 8 Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor.  
9 "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me."  
Matt 4:8-9 (NIV)

**Commented [notes6]:** 5 Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD"-- and you forgave the guilt of my sin. Selah  
6 Therefore let everyone who is godly pray to you while you may be found; surely when the mighty waters rise, they will not reach him.  
7 You are my hiding place; you will protect me from trouble and surround me with songs of deliverance. Selah  
Psalms 32:5-7 (NIV)

**Commented [notes7]:** 6 Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.  
Gen 15:6 (NIV)

**Commented [notes8]:** 5 By faith Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not experience death; he could not be found, because God had taken him away. For before he was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God.  
6 And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.  
Heb 11:5-6 (NIV)

**Commented [notes9]:** 24 "No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.  
Matt 6:24 (NIV)

**Commented [notes10]:** 13 Fear the LORD your God, serve him only and take your oaths in his name.  
Deut 6:13 (NIV)

**Commented [notes11]:** 2 "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times."  
Micah 5:2 (NIV)

**Commented [notes12]:** 1 Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honor Galilee of the Gentiles, by the way of the sea, along the Jordan-  
[... [1]

**Commented [notes13]:** 24 "Seventy 'sevens' are decreed for your people and your holy city to finish transgression, to put an end to sin, to atone for wickedness, to bring in everlasting righteousness,  
[... [2]

**Commented [notes14]:** 25 "Know and understand this: From the issuing of the decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until the Anointed One, the ruler, comes, there will be seven 'sevens,' and sixty-two  
[... [3]

Savior. Even the nations of the world looked toward Israel in expectation of a great King. Magi from the East saw a heavenly sign and began their journey to come and worship Him. Though Israel was under the thumb of Rome, taxed and subjugated by the emperor, the world anticipated the birth of a great king from there.

Lucifer had been at work in the kingdoms of the earth also. Dark and evil religions had prospered. The murder of one's own children in the name of these gods was a thing of honor. Immorality spread disease. Cities began to be quite large, making plagues and wholesale slaughter for gain by armies a frequent occurrence.

At the same time the Greek language spread throughout most of the world as a language of trade. Rome made roads that connected far-flung countries. Trade was on the increase, opening up distant lands. It was God's perfect time to send His salvation into the world.

Lucifer is not omniscient. He does not know the mind of God or man. He can only know what he is told or guesses. He surely saw the expectation in the world and may have sensed his reign of terror was about to be dealt a blow to the head, but from where and when? He must have thought that God would surely be born in a palace. The King of the universe would have an army to guard Him in His vulnerable existence as a baby, wouldn't He?

God pulled a sneak attack on Satan. He came through a peasant woman, Mary. Lucifer wasn't expecting Him to be born in a stable with an entourage of shepherds. But it was also a sneak attack on our hearts. Who could not relate to this little defenseless child born into poverty? Our hearts go out to Him before He does or says a thing.

Here is where we have an example in His birth that can transform the way we see our world. A baby in the hands of His Father God was safe from the Destroyer. This is probably the greatest picture in the world of absolute trust in the Sovereignty of God. In a short time, we will see Satan's attempt to snuff out His life through the soldiers of Herod. But when there was the need to escape, God warned Joseph in a dream to move to Egypt.

Do we imagine ourselves more vulnerable than that baby? Do we think that Satan has a more intense desire to attack us than the One who was prophesied to crush his head? If Almighty God could protect and keep baby Jesus, do you think He has any trouble watching over you? If Jesus had realized that He was number one on Satan's hit list, would he have slept at night? I think He did realize it, but He also realized that His times were in the Father's hands, just as yours are. "Do not fear" is one of the most repeated expressions of Scripture. It came from the lips of Jesus on more than one occasion. Remember that at His birth the angels sang, "Peace toward men of good will".

A Jewish man that we befriended on our vacation went diving with a group. He was somewhat inexperienced. He got separated as they descended and couldn't find the group. He did as instructed, went to the bottom and looked for a minute. Then a barracuda came. Then another joined the first, and finally a whole school. They can be six foot long with huge mouths. He started thinking the barracuda knew that he was alone and scared and began to panic. Fighting fear, he tried to surface slowly. The last 15' he ascended too quickly. There was really no danger from the barracuda, and he was not hurt, but fear caused him to have a terrible experience and could have killed him. Satan loves to use the tactic of fear. He can only do as he is allowed, but he loves to make you afraid. The fear can kill you.

How can we walk through this world of violence and dark powers without fear? At times we all feel we are out of our element and surrounded by barracuda. Know this, our Shepherd watches over us just as He watched over the baby Jesus. "I will not fear, for Thou art with me." (Psalm 23:4) Lack of fear and total trust in God do not mean that horrible circumstances and injustices will not take place. It does mean that God will be there with you through it all, and that He will bring good from evil. Just as the cross was the greatest injustice ever, it brought about the greatest good ever. But let's return to our big picture.

**Commented [notes15]:** 4 Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. Psalms 23:4 (NIV)

The turning point of history had arrived. God had entered the world. The head, the authority, of Satan was soon to be crushed. But first, as the promise predicted, the heel of the offspring of the woman would be bitten. That ol' serpent tried to bite Jesus all through His life, but not until it was God's perfect time did Jesus refuse to dodge his strike. As Satan sunk his fangs into Jesus' heel on the cross, our Lord leaned back with the weight of a righteous life pleasing to God, and He utterly crushed the head of that serpent.

Now, it is just the mopping up exercises. The serpent is still here to give people the choice that Adam and Eve had. He still offers something to worship other than the God who loves them and gave His life to redeem them. It is still a choice to love Him and receive the redemption He purchased for us, but for those who do, the communion of Eden is restored. The image of God in man is being restored in the redeemed. Death is no longer the penalty for our treason, because Jesus took our place.

In that manger in Bethlehem, light had come into the world, and where the light is, the darkness must flee. There, God demonstrated His ability to protect the helpless, to guard against the worst that hell can muster. The baby in the manger shows us we have a reason to trust God with our life. Satan does not threaten God any more than a gnat threatens an elephant.

The great fables and stories of time all relate to this one story that changed the course of mankind. The king that dressed as a pauper to win his peasant wife, the prince that kissed the sleeping beauty under the spell of the wicked witch, every

super hero that rescues man from the villain, all touch something in us because they are parables of the real story.

Where would we be if the baby did not come? If the hands that placed the stars in space refused to form the body of a baby with tiny helpless hands, where would we be? We would still be waiting for God to provide a way. We would be like those who have gone before us that placed their hope in God without knowing how He could make us right with Him. This was the only way. This baby was the mystery God had kept hidden through the ages. (Colossians 2:2-3) As Jesus approached the cross He asked if there was some other way (Matthew 26:39). There was none. God had to become one of us to take back dominion over the earth, to restore fellowship with man. He had to pay the price of our treason, death, so that we could live. (Colossians 2:13-14)

Christianity is unique in its understanding of God. Buddhism and Hinduism have a god so immanent that he is in everything. They would say that created things are god, that you are god, and that the mosquito is god. That makes God meaningless and impersonal.

Judaism and Islam would say God is so transcendent, so high and lofty, that we cannot approach Him. They could never see Him becoming man. It is too great a step down, too immanent. They would say He is so far above us that all we can do is bow as servants. There is some truth in that, but there is also something very impersonal and distant in that perspective.

Christianity says that God is both. He is high and holy, and yet, He loves us so much that He is immanently near us. He became one of us to help us see Him. The baby in the manger is both a transcendent and an immanent God, high and holy yet very near, caring, and personally involved in your life.

As we look at the baby in the manger, let us remember that God is able to watch over us. That He is God come near to demonstrate His love for us. Let us also remember that He completed what He came to do. He gave Himself for us. That should cause us to know that when we give our life for others, God will keep us until our ministry is done. We need not fear. We serve a great God, One who is great enough to draw near to us and do for us what we could not do for ourselves.

As you open your gifts this year, remember the greatest gift. The transcendent God became immanent to win the battle for your soul that you might worship what is good and not what is destructive and evil. He showed us that we can place our lives in the hands of our heavenly Father and have no fear. He came to be our ultimate example. He came to restore what sin marred. He came to free us from our death sentence. No greater gift has been, or ever will be, given. I hope you have claimed this gift. This is not a fable. It is the reality behind all the stories. The One who occupied the manger would love to be the King of your heart. Will you allow Him to be to you the personal immanent God He came to be?

**Commented [notes16]:** 2 My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, 3 in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.  
Col 2:2-3 (NIV)

**Commented [notes17]:** 39 Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will."  
Matt 26:39 (NIV)

**Commented [notes18]:** 13 When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, 14 having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross.  
Col 2:13-14 (NIV)

**Page 2: [1] Commented [notes12] notes**

1 Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honor Galilee of the Gentiles, by the way of the sea, along the Jordan--

2 The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned. Isaiah 9:1-2 (NIV)

**Page 2: [2] Commented [notes13] notes**

24 "Seventy 'sevens' are decreed for your people and your holy city to finish transgression, to put an end to sin, to atone for wickedness, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy and to anoint the most holy.

Dan 9:24 (NIV)

**Page 2: [3] Commented [notes14] notes**

25 "Know and understand this: From the issuing of the decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until the Anointed One, the ruler, comes, there will be seven 'sevens,' and sixty-two 'sevens.' It will be rebuilt with streets and a trench, but in times of trouble.

26 After the sixty-two 'sevens,' the Anointed One will be cut off and will have nothing. The people of the ruler who will come will destroy the city and the sanctuary. The end will come like a flood: War will continue until the end, and desolations have been decreed. Dan 9:25-26 (NIV)