

Ministry of Grace

The Christmas Story

The Christmas story began with a dietary restriction:

And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.” (Genesis 2:16-17)

Followed by rebellion and a curse

But, as we know, Adam and Eve could not resist the temptation of the delicious, forbidden food. Well, maybe they did – until they were tempted by the tempter beyond what they could resist. As a result, a curse was laid upon this earth.

And to Adam he said, “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’ cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. (Genesis 3:17-18)

Followed by a prophecy

And, not only was a curse laid upon the earth, and on the tempter, but the Lord, Himself, prophesied about Christmas.

The LORD God said to the serpent, “Because you have done this, cursed are you above all livestock and above all beasts of the field; on your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.” (Genesis 3:14-15)

Finally, a sacrifice

Can a little sin, a sin such as eating a piece of fruit, be enough to anger God? Well, actually, it wasn't the eating of the fruit that was the problem. The problem was that Adam and Eve wanted to be in control of their own destiny instead of submitting to the will of God. They did what they wanted to do, instead of what God wanted them to do. The end result was that they were naked before God and they were embarrassed. So, what did God do for them?

And the LORD God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins and clothed them. (Genesis 3:21)

Where did God get the skins to clothe Adam and Eve? He sacrificed animals! So – we see that from the beginning, a sacrifice was necessary to pay for sin.

Then there was increased rebellion and judgment

As mankind multiplied on the face of the earth, the wickedness of man also increased. God was grieved with the sinfulness of man.

The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the LORD regretted that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the LORD said, "I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens, for I am sorry that I have made them." But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD. (Genesis 6:5-8)

Followed by God's mercy

Even though God was grieved with the sinfulness of man, he had mercy on Noah and his family and provided them with a way to escape. Why did God choose to help Noah avoid the destruction that he deserved?

... Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation. Noah walked with God. (Genesis 6:9)

But we know from Paul's teaching that there is no one righteous, not even one! The key is that God *proclaimed him* as righteous and Noah "walked with God." In other words, Noah lived in close fellowship with God and in obedience to Him.

Finally, a sacrifice

Before we go on, let me ask you, "How many of each animal did Noah bring into the ark?" Here's a hint, the answer is not "one pair of each kind."

Then the LORD said to Noah, "Go into the ark, you and all your household, for I have seen that you are righteous before me in this generation. Take with you seven pairs of all clean animals, the male and his mate, and a pair of the animals that are not clean, the male and his mate, and seven pairs of the birds of the heavens also, male and female, to keep their offspring alive on the face of all the earth. (Genesis 7:1-3)

Why did Noah take seven pairs of the clean animals and seven pairs of the birds?

Do you remember what Noah did after the ark had landed safely? He released the animals. But what else did he do?

Then Noah built an altar to the LORD and took some of every clean animal and some of every clean bird and offered burnt offerings on the altar. And when the LORD smelled the pleasing aroma, the LORD said in his heart, "I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the intention of man's heart is evil from his youth. Neither will I ever again strike down every living creature as I have done. While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease." (Genesis 8:20-22)

Where did he get the extra animals to sacrifice? That's why he took the extras of the clean animals. They became the sacrifice. God provided a sacrifice for Adam and Eve and Noah prepared a sacrifice for himself and his family.

But, there was more rebellion, and a tower

So, Noah and his sons repopulated the earth. But, as the population grew, there was a problem. They wanted to do things their own way, just like Adam and Eve had. Plus – they wanted to make a name for themselves.

Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. And as people migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. And they said to one another, “Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.” And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth.” (Genesis 11:1-4)

Did they get their wish? They certainly made a name for themselves. Today, virtually everyone knows the story about the tower of Babel.

But God wanted people to love Him, worship Him, and serve Him. People who would willingly submit to His authority. He wanted a personal relationship with His people. He now had a dilemma. He was displeased with the people he had created, but He had promised that he would never again strike down every living creature. So – He started over – with Abram (also known as Abraham).

Followed by a promise

God promised Abram that he would be a special person and that all of the people on earth would be blessed because of him.

Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, **and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.**” (Genesis 12:1-3)

And a hero

Sometime later, after his nephew, Lot had moved to the city of Sodom, the people of Sodom rebelled against king Chedorlaomer. Therefore, the king along with his army and the armies of 3 other kings captured Sodom and carried off all the people as captives. So, Abram took it upon himself to rescue Lot.

When Abram heard that his kinsman had been taken captive, he led forth his trained men, born in his house, 318 of them, and went in pursuit as far as Dan. And he divided his forces against them by night, he and his servants, and defeated them and pursued them to Hobah, north of Damascus. Then he brought back all the possessions, and also brought back his kinsman Lot with his possessions, and the women and the people.

(Genesis 14:14-16)

A humble hero

After Abram brought the people back safely, the king of Sodom told Abram that he could have all the goods, if he would just let the king have his people back, but Abram, knowing that God was the real hero, refused to keep anything for himself.

But Abram said to the king of Sodom, “I have lifted my hand to the LORD, God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth, that I would not take a thread or a sandal strap or anything that is yours, lest you should say, ‘I have made Abram rich.’ (Genesis 14:22-23)

A humble servant who believed God’s promise

Because, Abram humbled himself and gave all the glory to God. The Lord took him outside and had him recite the story in the stars. This story ended with the presentation of the Messiah who would save all mankind. God’s response was, thus shall your seed be (the Messiah). [Note: the word translated “count” or “number,” also means “to recount,” that is, to tell the story.]

And he brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” (Genesis 15:5)

Followed by God’s grace

Because of Abram’s total submission to God and because he believed what God said about his offspring, the Lord declared Abram to be righteous. Abram did not earn this righteousness and he didn’t deserve it, but because of God’s grace, the Lord declared it to be so.

And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness. (Genesis 15:5-6)

Then there was a sacrifice

Notice that this is not a sin offering, but a thanksgiving offering.

He said to him, “Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.” And he brought him all these, cut them in half, and laid each half over against the other. But he did not cut the birds in half. And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away. (Genesis 15:9-11)

There was a miraculous birth of the promised son

Abram had been waiting for 30 years to have the son that God had promised him. So, when he was 100 years old and Sarah was 90 years old, she miraculously bore a son. The promised son. He became a “type” of the Son of God who would be born to a virgin. Both the birth of Isaac and the birth of Jesus were miraculous births.

And Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age at the time of which God had spoken to him. Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him, whom Sarah bore him, Isaac. (Genesis 21:2-3)

Followed by a sacrifice of the promised son

Then, when Isaac was a teenager, God told Abraham to sacrifice Isaac on the altar at Mt. Moriah. Once again, we see that Isaac was a “type” of Christ who was sacrificed by the father on Mt. Moriah.

He said, “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.” (Genesis 21:2-3)

But God provided the sacrificial animal

But God didn't really want Abraham to kill his son. What God wanted was Abraham's demonstration of submission and obedience to him. On the way up the hill Isaac noted that they had not brought an animal for the sacrifice. His father responded; God will provide for himself the lamb ... The lamb he was referring to was a prophetic reference to Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

And Isaac said to his father Abraham, "My father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." He said, "Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" Abraham said, "God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So they went both of them together. (Genesis 22:7-8)

So, just as Abraham was about to kill Isaac, God intervened.

Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son. But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." He said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. (Genesis 22:10-13)

God renewed His promise

And the LORD appeared to him and said, "Do not go down to Egypt; dwell in the land of which I shall tell you. Sojourn in this land, and I will be with you and will bless you, for to you and to your offspring I will give all these lands, and I will establish the oath that I swore to Abraham your father. I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and will give to your offspring all these lands. And in your offspring all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, (Genesis 26:2-4)

Followed by the birth of twins

Rebekah gave birth to twins who did not get along.

When her days to give birth were completed, behold, there were twins in her womb. The first came out red, all his body like a hairy cloak, so they called his name Esau. Afterward his brother came out with his hand holding Esau's heel, so his name was called Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them. (Genesis 25:24-26)

One of whom was a schemer

Jacob, who's name means "supplanter" or "schemer" tricked Esau into selling him his birthright. Then he later stole the paternal blessing of the firstborn that should have been Esau's.

Esau said, "Is he not rightly named Jacob? For he has cheated me these two times. He took away my birthright, and behold, now he has taken away my blessing." ... (Genesis 27:36)

The schemer wrestled with God

The animosity between the brothers was so severe that Jacob fled from Esau. When he was returning to Esau, he had repented of his deeds and wanted to make peace with his brother. But

even this was little more than a scheme from Jacob. On the night before the two brothers were to meet at last, Jacob slept alone and wrestled with God. At the end of the wrestling match, God changed his name to Israel, which means, “he who wrestles with God.”

And Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched his hip socket, and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, “Let me go, for the day has broken.” But Jacob said, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.” And he said to him, “What is your name?” And he said, “Jacob.” Then he said, “Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed.” (Genesis 32:24-28)

Followed by the birth of a special son

Israel had two wives. One that he loved, named Rachel, and one that he didn't, named Leah. Leah gave him six sons, but Rachel was barren. Finally, Rachel gave birth to Joseph, who would one day be second in command in Egypt and save the family from a famine. Finally, the last son born to Israel was Benjamin. He was Israel's favorite. He was a unique, one-of-a-kind son to Israel. As such, he was a “type” of Christ.

Then they journeyed from Bethel. When they were still some distance from Ephrath, Rachel went into labor, and she had hard labor. And when her labor was at its hardest, the midwife said to her, “Do not fear, for you have another son.” And as her soul was departing (for she was dying), she called his name Ben-oni; but his father called him Benjamin.... Israel journeyed on and pitched his tent beyond the tower of Eder. (Genesis 35:16-18, 21)

The name that his mother gave him, Ben-oni, means “son of sorrow.” The name that Israel gave him, Benjamin, means “son of my right hand.” This son was born at, or very near, the tower of Eder, which is just outside Ephrath. The city of Ephrath became Bethlehem. The tower of Eder is also known as Migdal Eder, which means “the tower of the flock.”

1700 years later

Many things have happened since Benjamin was born. The sons of Israel have moved to Egypt for relief from the famine and they eventually became enslaved to the Egyptians. Our Creator God had pity on them and rescued them from Egypt and brought them into their own land, a land which had been promised to them. God warned them not to intermarry with the native people and not to worship their idols. But Israel didn't listen to God. Not only did they worship the idols of the land, they also wanted to be like the other nations and have a king to rule over them. So, God gave them King Saul, who was a selfish king. Then God raised up David, a man after God's own heart. He was a king who loved God and spent his entire life in a personal relationship with God.

After David's death, the people split into two groups and both groups continued to worship the idols of the land. So, God punished them by having other nations come and conquer them, carrying them away to foreign lands. Eventually, some of them came back to the land that had been promised to them, but they continued to worship idols and, instead of seeking a personal relationship with their God, they lived by the rules instituted by Moses. When the people complained to God about their plight, he sent them prophets to guide them. These prophets

foretold a coming Messiah who would set them free. He would be a king like David, one who would rule with justice and righteousness. The people, living under foreign rule, longed for the Messiah and the freedom He would bring. What the people really needed was a sacrifice.

A prophet declares the coming Messiah

In keeping with his loving care for His people, Israel, God promised a future king from David's descendants

Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David, and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. (Jeremiah 33:14-15)

The prophets never said exactly when their Messiah would come, but they told the people where the Messiah would be born. He would be born in Bethlehem, the city of David.

But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, being little among the clans of Judah, out of you He shall come forth to Me to become ruler in Israel; and His comings forth have been from of old, from the days of antiquity. (Micah 5:2)

These prophets even foretold where in Bethlehem he would be born.

And you, O tower of the flock, hill of the daughter of Zion, to you shall it come, the former dominion shall come, kingship for the daughter of Jerusalem. (Micah 4:8)

The "former dominion" was a clear reference to the rule of David, and the "tower of the flock" was a specific location on the outskirts of Bethlehem where sheep were raised specifically for sacrifices.

The prophets even gave hints about the coming of the Messiah:

And he said, "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary men, that you weary my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel. (Isaiah 7:13-14)

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. (Isaiah 9:6)

But the people weren't looking for a child, they were looking for a conquering king who would defeat all their enemies and usher in peace on earth.

God selected The Virgin

God sent an angel to Mary to tell her that she was going to give birth to the Messiah. "But," she said, "I'm a virgin! I can't have a baby."

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid,

Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” And Mary said to the angel, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?” And the angel answered her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.” And Mary said, “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” And the angel departed from her. (Luke 1:26-38)

A Roman census was ordered

Mary was pregnant and living in Nazareth. But the prophets said that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem at *Migdal Eder*. Since Mary and her fiancée were both of the house of David, they were required to go to Bethlehem to be registered, even though it was late in her pregnancy. While they were in Bethlehem, Mary delivered her baby.

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. (Luke 2:1-7)

An angelic announcement was declared to shepherds

These weren't just ordinary shepherds. These were Levitical shepherds who were responsible for the care and feeding (and birthing) of the sacrificial animals. Apparently, they were a fair distance away from Bethlehem.

And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!” When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.” (Luke 2:8-15)

This message was filled with exciting news; the birth of the Messiah. They knew that He was born in Bethlehem because that was the city of David. But where would they find him? The angelic message gave them that information also. Remember, these were Levitical shepherds,

they knew about the Tower of the Flock (*Migdal Eder*). That's where all the sacrificial lambs were born. On the bottom floor of the tower was a room where these births took place. Actually, it was little more than a stall. The Greek word that describes it is *phatnē*, which could refer to a feeding trough, but it also refers to a stall (see [Luke 13:15](#)) However, among the Levitical shepherds this stall was referred to as "the stall." So how did they know the angel was referring to the birthing stall and not just a manger somewhere? Some of the most reliable Greek texts actually say:

And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in *the* stall.

This is precisely where and how the sacrificial animals were tended after they were born. They were swaddled in strips of cloth and laid in the birthing stall.

Let's talk about John the Baptist for just a minute. He was Jesus' cousin, just a few months older. He knew where Jesus was born and it seems that he had a nick-name for his cousin. Do you remember how he referred to his cousin Jesus?

The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" ([John 1:29](#))

The next day again John was standing with two of his disciples, and he looked at Jesus as he walked by and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God!" ([John 1:35-36](#))

The Perfect Sacrifice

God wanted to have people who would fellowship with Him, to walk with Him like Enoch and Noah did, to be a man after God's heart like David was. The problem was that all men are sinful and we know that:

... the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. ([Romans 6:23](#))

Just like Adam and Noah, mankind still needed a sacrifice. So, in order for God to have a relationship with man, he had to provide a blood sacrifice that would satisfy his own system of justice.

Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins. ([Hebrews 9:22](#))

But, the blood of animals can't pay for man's sin.

For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. ([Hebrews 10:4](#))

So, now God had another problem. In order for Him to have a personal relationship with man, He had to find a way to pay for man's sin. He needed a sacrificial Lamb that was human; one who was willing to die to pay for the sins of others. So, God sent His own Son to be born of a virgin so that he would not inherit our sin nature. And, only His son could live a perfect life, a life without sin. Did you ever stop to think that Jesus' whole purpose for being born was - to die. He was the Perfect Sacrifice.

This is the Christmas Story

On Christmas Day, in Bethlehem, at *Migdal Eder*, God brought forth the Lamb of God, born of a virgin, born to be sacrificed for you and me. This, truly, is the greatest Christmas Gift given by anyone, and God has freely given this gift to you and me.

And – One day there will be no more dietary restrictions.

What's your gift?

Christmas is not just about receiving gifts; it's about giving gifts as well. God has given us the greatest gift of all time. If we want a relationship with God, we have to accept His Christmas gift. But what are you going to give Him? You may ask yourself, "What do I have that God doesn't already have?" The answer is, "You." In Matthew's gospel Jesus says:

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." (Matthew 11:28-30)

That's the only gift He wants from us. He wants us to give ourselves by submitting to His will, by forsaking the things we want, and doing the things that He wants. "But that might be painful!" Yes, it might, and, in fact, it probably will be. But so was the cross, and He asks us to take up our cross daily, and follow Him.

Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. (Matthew 16:24)

If you are a Christian, you have already received His gift. What have you given Him in return? If you're still living your life your own way, you haven't given Him what He wants. This Christmas, let's give God the only gift that He wants, a humble, submissive follower dedicated to serving Him!

Let's Pray.

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