

Was the First Christmas Really So Heavenly?

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What took place on that first Christmas? What was the importance, the impact of the birth of a certain child in Bethlehem of Judea, in 4 BC or thereabouts? (As you know, the people who invented our calendar several centuries later were off by a few years.)

The Bible, of course, lays out the long-range significance of that birth in Bethlehem. The child who was born would grow up to proclaim the arrival of the kingdom of God, the Creator's will done "on earth as it is in heaven." That child would demonstrate the presence of that kingdom in healing the sick, delivering people from demonic oppression, feeding the multitude, stilling the storm — and, above all, awakening his people to God's presence in their midst. By his resurrection from the dead he would be vindicated as the Messiah of Israel, the Son of God, the King with authority over all things. By his resurrection he would inaugurate God's new creation, restoring humanity to the image of God that has been defaced and suppressed by man's disobedience. Such was his impact that his followers came to know him as the Word of God in human form, dwelling in our midst "full of grace and truth" (John 1:14).

And through two millennia of history this child's impact has been felt in what his followers have done to better our human condition with works of justice and mercy — building hospitals and schools, confronting oppression and slavery, lifting the disadvantaged into liberty and prosperity, elevating the worth of the individual to where it has become a cultural norm in areas influenced by Christianity. These benefits did not exist in most of the world before the birth of this child. All of these things he was to bring with the advance of his gospel, his good news, across this planet the Creator made, and which he wants to bless. It's no wonder that at Christmas time we want to celebrate with such joy because of what God has done through Jesus of Nazareth.

And so we think of Christmas as a time of special beauty, a time of glory. The mystery of the incarnation — God taking human form in the baby Jesus, to accomplish his purpose in our midst — this mystery inspires in us a sense of wonder. Because this idea of God's becoming man is so extraordinary, we feel it's appropriate to celebrate Christmas with all the glitter and sparkle and tinselly trappings we can muster. Our Christmas cards are full of lovely pictures of angel choirs, peaceful villages, reverent manger pageants, and gleaming stars. Somehow we feel the first Christmas must have been such a special, "holy" time.

Our favorite carols reflect that sentiment. "There's a Song in the Air" as angels "touch their harps of gold." "All is calm, all is bright" on this "silent night." Bethlehem's "deep and dreamless sleep" is undisturbed, for "born the king of angels," "little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes."

But was it really that way, that first Christmas? Was it really so heavenly, so ethereal, so glorious? Let's think for a moment about the familiar Gospel story of the people and events surrounding the birth of Jesus. Think of what people were doing as the story unfolds:

- A doubting priest — the father of John the Baptist — loses his ability to speak.
- A young Jewish woman — Miriam of Nazareth — learns of her unexpected pregnancy.
- Her startled husband, Joseph, considers getting a divorce.
- A foreign emperor's troops, the legions of Caesar, occupy their land.

- People from Galilee must travel for miles, at great hardship, to pay the tax demanded by this oppressive regime.
- Shepherds have to work all night in the open field, protecting their flocks.
- A baby is born in a manger, among the livestock and beasts of burden, because the local inn has no vacancy.
- Foreign dignitaries trudge wearily across a barren desert following a strange beacon.
- A wicked ruler, sensing a threat to his power, slaughters innocent children.

No, the birth of Jesus wasn't all glitter and glory. It didn't occur under peaceful, benign circumstances. It wasn't at all like the beautiful images on our Christmas cards, or Nativity scenes, or historic paintings by the great masters. The birth of the Son of God took place in the midst of some very ordinary situations. Jesus was born into a harsh environment, where people faced difficulty and deprivation and hopelessness, where they had to struggle to get along.

But that's the point of it all, isn't it? A God who loves us wouldn't come to us covered with forbidding glory, shielding himself from our struggles and putting on a façade of peaceful complacency. A God who loves us would come just as Jesus came, in the midst of the ordinary grind of our daily existence. He would come to say, "I'm taking on your humble life, in order to raise it up to my kind of life. I'm taking on human nature so you can become 'partakers of the divine nature' (2 Peter 1:4). I'm coming to you as Immanuel, 'God with us,' so that through him you can come to me and belong to my family and enjoy the blessings of my kingdom."

We do celebrate, yes. We do cover Christmas with glory and glad song, because of what Christmas means: God in our midst, "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Colossians 1:27). That's a truth we can't ignore, and it's right that we should celebrate it because of the difference it makes in our lives today. But let's always remember, too, that God is with us even in the everyday humdrum of life when things look dull and ordinary and even tedious and hard and disappointing. Messiah Jesus first came to us in that very same kind of world. And because he is with us now that world, despite its problems, is nevertheless a better place than it was. Because of Jesus, our world can still embrace all the promise of God's new creation, when "the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea" (Habakkuk 2:14).

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