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Birth and Circumcision of Jesus



The Life and Teachings of Christ - Steve Gregg

In this presentation, Steve Gregg delves into the biblical accounts of the birth and circumcision of Jesus. He emphasizes the vital role Joseph played in Jesus' early life and education, teaching him the trade of carpentry. Gregg also explores the prophecy of a virgin giving birth, as well as the significance of Jesus being named and circumcised on the eighth day. He highlights the angels' announcement of Jesus' birth as evidence of his divinity and emphasizes the concept of circumcision of the heart as a crucial spiritual act. Overall, the presentation provides a comprehensive analysis of these key events in Jesus' life and their significance for Christianity.

Transcript

In our last session on the life of Christ, we took the latter part of Luke chapter 1. And in this session we will be going into Luke chapter 2, but first we have to turn to Matthew chapter 1. Because we want to take things in the order of their actual occurrence, it has become necessary for us to take another bit out of Matthew. When we were talking about the genealogies of Christ, we took the first part of Matthew chapter 1. Now we'll take the rest of it, which means we will have the entirety of Luke 1 and Matthew 1 behind us. And we'll be well on our way through Luke chapter 2 before this session is over.

In Matthew chapter 1, verse 18, the story begins. The genealogy of Christ was occupied our attention in the first 17 verses. In verse 18 it says, Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows.

After his mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found with child of the Holy Spirit. Then Joseph, her husband, being a just man and not wanting to make her a public example, was minded to put her away secretly. But while he thought about these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit.

And she will bring forth a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his

people from their sins. So all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying, Behold, the virgin shall be with child and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel, which is translated God with us. Then Joseph, being aroused from sleep, did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took to him his wife, and did not know her until she had brought forth her firstborn son, and he called his name Jesus.

Now this passage is sandwiched between the end of Luke chapter 1 and the beginning of Luke chapter 2. Because Luke chapter 2 actually tells the story of the birth of Jesus, and this obviously precedes it. However, Luke chapter 1 closes with the birth of John the Baptist some six months before the birth of Jesus. And at that time, when John was born, Mary returned from the village in the hill country of Judea, where she had been visiting Elizabeth and Zechariah, she returned after the birth of John the Baptist to her own home of Nazareth, where her fiancé Joseph lived.

Now, by this time she would have been about three months pregnant, and therefore she would have just begun to show. It's interesting that she left and spent the time away from home when she was not showing. A time when she could have gotten away with concealing her pregnancy.

But then she came back to face the music at the very time of her pregnancy where it would have been becoming evident that she was pregnant. She would have to give some explanation. We're not told how it was that Joseph discovered that Mary was with child.

It says she was found to be with child. And so it may be that she simply came out and told Joseph that she was with child. And if she did, she certainly would have told him the whole story.

She would have told him that she was in child by the Holy Spirit. It may be that she didn't quite know how to break it to him and had returned to her parents' home, and that they had sent a message to Joseph knowing that it was only fair that he should know. Joseph, of course, knew that he was not the father.

And he really had two options. One was to do what the law said, which was to have her exposed to public shame and stoning. Because they were betrothed, and a betrothal was as binding as marriage.

And therefore, for her to have slept with another man other than her betrothed was not considered fornication but adultery. The penalty for adultery was much stiffer under the law than for fornication. And therefore, she would have faced stoning if Joseph had wished to press the issue.

It's interesting, we never read anywhere in the Bible, including the Old Testament, of people who were stoned to death for adultery. But the death penalty of stoning is

commanded, or at least is recommended as the proper means of paying the penalty for that crime of adultery. We just don't have any actual records in the Bible of anyone ever getting stoned for it.

We do know that the Pharisees brought to Jesus a woman who was taken in adultery, suggesting that she should be stoned. But whether they really intended to stone her or not is open to question. They could not have done so legally under the law of Rome.

And if they had stoned her, they would have had to face some consequences at the hands of Rome. It seems fairly likely that they did not intend to really stone the woman, but wanted to hang Jesus on the question of whether he would approve of stoning her or not. And it put him in a hard spot, but he was easily able to handle it.

Mary probably lived at a time when it would not be likely that she would be stoned. But she could have been, conceivably, if the Jews could have pulled it off and then dispersed to such a point that the Romans would never discover who had been a participant. They wouldn't be able to nail it anyway.

And the Jews sometimes did participate in mob action, as is clear in the Book of Acts, on repeated occasions. They did, in a mob, things that they might not be permitted to do if it was planned out and if they sought to go through the regular channels. In any case, not choosing to stone her, Joseph could have at least exposed her to public shame.

It is possible, because of the Roman restrictions about this, that she might have avoided being stoned, even if Joseph had been malicious. But he could have certainly felt betrayed in this situation, and one would expect that he would. Initially, he believed what anyone would believe, namely that she had slept with another man.

He knew that he had not slept with her, and therefore he was not the father. And no one had ever yet heard of a case where a woman had become pregnant without sleeping with a man. And therefore, for him to believe that his fiancée happened to be the one exception in all of history, would be asking him to believe something that is rather challenging to accept.

And so he assumed what anyone would assume, that she had been not as virtuous as he had perceived her to be. He must have been shocked and hurt. The more virtuous you perceive your wife to be, or your fiancée to be, the more shocking and more hurtful it is if you find them to be otherwise.

If you have suspicions about their goodness already, it still hurts. But it hurts more if you really fully trusted them and had no doubts about their integrity before. And certainly Mary was such a woman that Joseph must have thought her to be absolutely faithful and pure and virtuous, and this must have come as quite a shock to him.

Now, he could have acted evilly. I guess we wouldn't even say it was evil. He was within

his rights to be angry.

But he could have acted cruelly. He could have exposed her to public shame. He could have made her name a reproach.

He could have done much to guarantee that she probably would never find a decent husband anywhere. And of course, he was going to divorce her because she had shown herself, apparently, to be a very different kind of woman than he had judged her to be when he entered into an arrangement to marry her. But the interesting thing is how he was not rash.

He slept on it. He heard about it, but he didn't immediately act upon it. It was while he slept that God spoke to him, which means that he decided not to do anything or make any rash decisions the day he heard about it.

There was at least one night to intervene. And he was pondering what he should do. He didn't quite know what to do, and it says he specifically was a just man, which suggests he was righteous in the sight of God.

And he didn't want to make a public example of her, although he could have. Now, for a man to feel as betrayed as Joseph must have felt, and yet to have no bitterness, and no anger, and no desire to get back at her, as many men would have naturally felt like doing, would suggest that he was a man of unusually cool temperament. That he was a man who had a rule over his own spirit.

That he was a great man. A humble man by occupation. A carpenter.

Wasn't much of a moneymaker. He was probably not very great in the eyes of man, but in terms of having a gentle and a quiet spirit, he clearly was a great man. And I think that, as I said earlier, God must have selected the very finest man and woman to raise Jesus that were available at the time.

Remember, though Jesus was God, he came to earth as a real person, with real limitations. He was going to form his opinions of the world the same way most children do. He had to be educated.

He had to learn to read. He wasn't born knowing how to read. He had to go to school to learn that.

He didn't automatically, instinctively know what the scriptures said. He had to study the scriptures. He didn't even know instantly that he was the son of God.

That had to be revealed to him, no doubt. In fact, when he was a babe in the manger, he probably didn't know anything more than any babe newborn knows. It can hardly be suggested that Jesus, as he lay in the manger, had all the knowledge of all the mysteries

in the universe going through his head.

The Bible says that when he became a man, he emptied himself, in Philippians chapter 2. When it speaks about, though he existed in the form of God, and he did not consider equality with God a thing to be grasped, he emptied himself and took on himself the form of a servant. This emptying of himself is a process that is very mysterious, but the Bible certainly would give evidence that he emptied himself of many of his divine attributes and privileges. We know from much data in the New Testament that Jesus gave up his omnipotence when he came to earth.

At least he laid it aside temporarily for his earthly life. He was not omnipotent. God, in the Old Testament, is said to be omnipotent, all-powerful, never becoming weary, never becoming exhausted in his energy.

But Jesus became exhausted and fell asleep on occasions because he simply was worn out. He obviously did not have limitless energy, as he did before he came to earth. When he became a man, he took on a human body with its limitations.

He was not everywhere at once when he was on earth. He gave up his omnipresence for the time being, and obviously had to live in one place at a time, and could only be in one place at a time. This is clearly affirmed when Lazarus died, and Jesus said to his disciples, Our friend Lazarus is dead, and I'm glad that I wasn't there, so that you might believe.

We have to go to him now. But in saying, I wasn't there, he makes it very plain. He was not omnipresent.

He wasn't everywhere at once. One place he wasn't was where Lazarus was. In fact, the only place he was was that one spot where he was.

Though he was God, prior to his coming to earth and possessed omnipresence and omnipotence, he laid those things aside. He put those down. He emptied himself of those things.

Likewise, his omniscience, his knowing all things was a quality that he put aside. When Jesus was on earth, he didn't know everything, but he certainly did before he came to earth. He was God, and God knows everything.

But Jesus said while he was on earth, there were things that he didn't know. Some things his father knew that he didn't know. He said, No one knows the day or the hour of the coming of the Son of Man.

Only the Father knows that. He said, Even I don't know that. So it's clear that Jesus had laid aside his divine privileges of omniscience and omnipresence and omnipotence.

And since he did so, it was necessary for him to learn things just like any other child had learned things. Of course, somewhere in the process of his growing up, things were revealed to him by his father about his identity and his mission and who he really was. In fact, eventually when he became a preacher and a teacher, he said the very words that he spoke were the words the Father gave him.

So he was a man who lived under human handicaps, but who, because of his special identity, God the Father revealed who he was to him and gave him the words to speak and worked miracles through him and did things like that. But Jesus was living under human handicaps. Now that being so, it means that Jesus had to learn the same things other people have to learn.

And like any child growing up in a home, he had to learn about family life. He had to learn what a father is like. In Jesus' later teaching, he frequently referred to God as Father.

No other writer in the Bible previous to Jesus' time had ever referred to God as Father in a major sense. I mean, there's one or two times in Isaiah. Isaiah suggests that God is a father to Israel.

And in the Psalms it says, like as a father pities his children, so the Lord pities those who fear him. So God was on rare occasions spoken of as a father in the Old Testament, but in Jesus' ministry, he called him Father all the time. And that was the principal thing about God that Jesus came to introduce and to familiarize people with God about, was that he was a father.

But what's the use of using that term if not to say, this describes the kind of relationship God wants to have with us, the kind that a father has with a son. Everybody has a father, or almost everybody does, and most people knew how a father related to a son. And so for Jesus to say, God is your father, your father knows that you have need of these things.

You earthly fathers give good gifts to your children, how much more will a heavenly father do this? And Jesus used earthly fathers as a model of what God is like in many respects. Now, Jesus himself had to form his opinions at some point in his life as to what an earthly father was like. And the most natural place for those opinions to be formed would be in his own home when he was growing up.

And this is a tremendous compliment to Joseph in a sense, although the Bible never gives it in a direct way. When Jesus began to say, call God Father, certainly Jesus first learned what the meaning of the word Father meant by observing Joseph. Joseph was his first role model of a father.

In fact, Jesus called God Abba Father. In the Garden of Gethsemane he said, Abba Father.

Now Abba, as you may have heard, is an Aramaic word, which means Daddy.

It's a word that children use. It's actually a little less juvenile than the word Daddy, but a little more familiar than the word Father. It's something like maybe Papa.

And so, you know, obviously the first person Jesus learned to apply that word to in his life was Joseph. The word Abba, as a child to Jesus, meant Joseph. Later he realized that he had another Abba, who was God.

But he felt quite natural applying the same term to God as he had formerly learned to apply to Joseph, which must mean there was no great incongruity between the character of Joseph and the character of God. And that's, of course, the whole point of saying that God is a father, is that the best of fathers resemble God in many ways. And not in all ways, of course, because earthly fathers are not perfect.

But Jesus frequently made points about how earthly fathers are and how the Heavenly Father should not be thought to be less loving or less concerned, in fact more so. But when Jesus got his concepts of what a father is like, his first concepts came from his exposure to this man who was actually his stepfather, Joseph. And we can see that God chose for that role of being the first mentor, the first role model to Jesus.

God chose a man who was a just man, slow to wrath, reasonable, forgiving, a man who could absorb injury without having a craving to inflict vengeance. This is an even-tempered, godly man that was the first male influence on the life of the infant and growing young Jesus. And while we have very little about Joseph in the Bible, we can deduce much about him from the way Jesus talked about fathers.

Let me show you something Jesus said at a later time in his life in John chapter 5. In John chapter 5, Jesus is blamed by the religious leaders because he healed a man on the Sabbath. And he answers for himself in verse 17. Jesus answered them and said, My father has been working until now, and I have been working.

In other words, I do what my father does. My father works on the Sabbath and every other day, so I don't see any reason to stop working on the Sabbath either. Basically, whatever God does, I'll do because he's my father and I'm his son, and sons copy their fathers.

A little later, a few, two verses later, Jesus elaborates on this with what is sometimes called the parable of the apprentice son. He says in verse 19, Most assuredly I say to you, the son can do nothing of himself, but what he sees the father do. For whatever he does, the son also does in the same way, in like manner.

For the father loves the son and shows him all things that he himself does. Up to that point, Jesus could be talking about any father or any son. Of course, he gets very specific, and in the New King James, there's capital letters on father and son, so that you

know, of course, obviously he's talking about himself and God, the father.

But there's no capitals in the Greek. The fact is, the words of Jesus in that section can be taken just as a generic description of the ordinary relationship that all sons in Israel knew with their fathers. If a father was a fisherman, or a tradesman of some sort, a carpenter as in the case of Joseph, he would teach his son the same trade.

The son didn't have to go to college, the son didn't even have to go to school beyond about what's the equivalent of about sixth grade for us. Once he learned to read, he didn't have to learn anything else in school. He learned from his father how to make a living.

Now, a child is not born instinctively, for instance, knowing how to shape wood and make ox yokes that would fit comfortably on the neck of an ox and yield complete control over the ox and so forth, or to build chairs and tables or boats, the kinds of things that carpenters made. Jesus wasn't born knowing how to make those things, even though he crafted the world. He was born in a condition not knowing how to make so much as a chair.

And he had to learn that like any other child would have to from, in this case, his stepfather who was a carpenter. And Jesus learned the trade just like any Jewish boy would learn the trade from his father. And Jesus is speaking very generically about fathers and sons in verses 19 and 20.

Of course, he is saying so in order to make a point about himself and God. He said, if God works on the Sabbath, I'm going to work on the Sabbath. You know why? Because sons always apprentice after their fathers.

Sons don't know what to do except what they see their fathers do, and then they copy their father and they do it right. If their father does it right, the sons do it right when they copy their fathers. I'm just copying my father.

He does good deeds to people on the Sabbath, I'll do good deeds to people on the Sabbath too. How can I do it other than the way my father does? But to make that point about himself and God the Father, he speaks in a parable, as I said, sometimes called the parable of the apprentice son, because most sons were apprentices to their father. Jesus himself was an apprentice to Joseph until the time that Jesus entered the ministry.

He learned the trade of carpentry. And he must have been reflecting on his own experience with Joseph when he said, the son can do nothing of himself but what he sees his father do. Jesus as a little boy would have watched Joseph in the carpenter shop, tackling various kinds of challenges and projects that came to him to bring in income for the family, observing how the various tools were handled, when to glue and when to nail and when to fasten with pegs and so forth, and just basically how to be an artisan with

the few tools that they had in those days, usually just a chisel and a hammer and a saw, that's about all they had.

But with those they could build a boat, they could build a house, or they could build a cabinet, they could build all kinds of things. And there is a tradition, I think it comes from Justin Martyr, if I'm not mistaken, that Jesus as an adult hung an ox yoke out in front of his shop, that was one that he made himself, with the sign, My yokes fit well. And that one of his specialties as a carpenter was that he made ox yokes that were renowned for their fit on the neck of oxen.

Of course, Jesus later said, My yoke is easy and my burden is light. And this statement from Justin Martyr, I believe it is, may be reading back into the life of Jesus something from a later statement, or it may in fact be a true tradition of what Jesus did before he entered the ministry. But this is the important point.

The Son, Jesus, didn't know how to make things out of wood instinctively. He only knew what he saw Joseph do, what he sees the Father do. Whatever the Father does, the Son does so in the same way.

You can just picture this little boy in the shop, watching how his father shaves the wood with a plane or something, or a chisel, and copying him and doing it just the same way. That's exactly the scene that was familiar to any Jewish person who had a father who taught him their trade. And in verse 21 it says, For the Father loves the Son, and shows him all things that he himself does.

Obviously, the thing Jesus is trying to say is that God the Father loves Jesus. But certainly the idea that fathers generally love their sons, and want their sons to be self-sufficient, and want their sons to be the best craftsmen they can be, therefore they teach them all the tricks of the trade. They teach their sons things they would never teach their competitors.

All their special little techniques that make their products special and better. The Father doesn't conceal any of those things from his son, because his son is going to take over the family business. And so the Father shows the son exactly how he does things, and the son imitates perfectly.

And this all goes on because the Father loves the Son. Now of course, Jesus got this picture from his own life, growing up learning carpentry from Joseph. He sensed that Joseph loved him enough to teach him to be a craftsman, and to teach him all the tricks of the family trade.

Now, this is perhaps to a certain extent more a commendation of Joseph when you consider that Jesus was not Joseph's son. And Joseph did have sons. Joseph and Mary had at least four sons together.

And yet, it would appear that Jesus, because he was the oldest, was given preferential treatment by Joseph. It may be that the other sons learned carpentry as well, we don't know. But only Jesus is said to have learned it, have been a carpenter.

In any case, what I'm saying is there is much about Joseph's character that can be deduced reading between the lines. Not so much in the story where Joseph appears as a leading character, but in the things Jesus later said about fathers, that he learned by being with Joseph when he was a child, and learning what fatherhood looks like, and what a father is like. Well, Joseph was a good father.

He was a just man. And although this story does not relate to the way he treated Jesus, we can see in the way he treated Mary, that he was a man of unusual godliness. He didn't want to lash out at her.

He didn't want to make her a public example. He was minded to put her away secretly. He didn't feel it was appropriate to marry her, since he couldn't trust her, but he didn't hold it against her in the sense of wanting to make her life miserable.

He thought he'd make this a quiet matter. Going to probably go negotiate the breaking of the betrothal with her father secretly, and just keep it quiet, and not say anything. And maybe, who knows, maybe her baby could be born somewhat secretly, and wouldn't have become a big blab around the town.

Now, it says, but when he thought about these things, it shows he was a thoughtful man. Behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take you, Mary, your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. Now, it says back in verse 18, that she was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit.

But that doesn't mean that those who found her to be with child knew that she was with child of the Holy Spirit. That's simply what the Bible is telling us, that she was pregnant, and it was of the Holy Spirit. Now, Joseph hears it from God's mouth himself, from an angel's mouth, which is sent from God, that she is conceived by the Holy Spirit, she has not been unfaithful, she is still a virgin, and Joseph certainly has no reason to feel betrayed, and no doubt that changed his whole attitude.

And she will bring forth a son, and you will call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins. Whether Joseph knew that that was to be the chief role of the Messiah, to save his people from their sins or not, I don't know. It's hard to know how much Bible-turning a simple carpenter would have.

Probably very little. And even the Pharisees hardly understood. Who were experts in the law, they hardly understood that the Messiah was mainly coming to save people from their sins, not from their oppressors.

But, no doubt Joseph could deduce from what was said here that this boy was going to be the Messiah. He would be a savior to his people. He'd save them from their sins, and his name is given.

And he says, so all this was done that it might be fulfilled, which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying, Behold, the virgin shall be with child. This quote is from Isaiah 7.14. There's something ambiguous about the prophecy in Isaiah 7.14. We don't have time to look at it in detail now. But in the context, Isaiah 7 is about King Ahaz, and the fear he had, and the dread he had of two kings and their armies that had come to besiege him.

And Isaiah was sent with the message that Ahaz, if these kings are not going to be a problem to you, don't be intimidated by them. Sure, there's two against one there, but don't worry. God has declared they'll be gone within three years or so.

And he gave Ahaz the chance to ask God for a sign about this. Ahaz refused to ask for a sign, and so Isaiah said, Well, then God will give you a sign himself. And this is it.

The virgin shall conceive and bring forth a son, and you shall call his name Immanuel. Now, the reason this is difficult is because Isaiah said that this birth of this child was going to be a sign to Ahaz, which Ahaz lived 700 and something years before Christ and didn't ever see the birth of Christ. How was it a sign to him? Furthermore, the prophecy goes on in the next verses to say that he will eat curds and honey, and until the time that he is able to eat solid food, or prior to the time that he knows to choose between good and evil, in other words, before he's very old, before he's reached any kind of age of accountability, the country will be abandoned by these two kings that you dread.

Now, the sign was this. A child was going to be born, and according to the prophecy, before that child would reach anything like a state of maturity, before that child would even know the difference between good and evil, those kings would be gone. So the birth of the child was going to be a sign to Ahaz that only a few years at the most from then his troubles would be over.

The problem is, of course, Ahaz never lived to see Jesus born, and the prophecy according to this text is about Jesus. Now, Isaiah chapter 8, the very next chapter, describes the birth of Isaiah's son. And Isaiah's son, when he is born, there's a prediction that before he will reach an age where he can say, my mother and my father, the two kings of Syria and Israel will be taken away.

The same prophecy, essentially, as was made in chapter 7 about the birth of this child. So one gets the impression that the prophecy in Isaiah 7.14 is about Isaiah's son, who was assigned to Ahaz, and about whom the same thing was said. From his birth until a very short time afterwards would be all that would be left before those two kings were gone that were threatening Ahaz.

Well, the problem, of course, is the fact that the prophecy says the virgin shall conceive. And Isaiah's wife clearly was not a virgin. It says he went in unto her and she conceived.

So, obviously, she wasn't a virgin. Although, it is possible that when he said the virgin shall conceive, it may have meant a woman who at the time the prophecy is uttered is now a virgin. She will, at some point, conceive.

And it's possible that Isaiah took a woman who was a virgin, married her, and she conceived in their regular relations. Someone might say, well, that wouldn't make it much of a sign because there's nothing miraculous about it. But the Bible doesn't say a sign always has to be miraculous.

In fact, later in Isaiah chapter 8, I think it's in verse 20, Isaiah says, I and the children that the Lord has given me are for signs and for wonders in Israel. So, he specifically says that his children are signs and himself also signs to Israel. He's not suggesting there was anything miraculous about their conception.

So, a sign doesn't have to be miraculous. It's just something that God attaches significance to. And so, it appears that the natural understanding of the prediction about the virgin conceiving and bearing a child would be to apply it to Isaiah's own son.

How do we reconcile this? Well, interestingly, Isaiah, like several other Old Testament characters, including David and others, is a type of Christ in many ways. And his son, Mehershal Elhashbaz, apparently was a type of Christ also. And the birth of Mehershal Elhashbaz must have been regarded by Matthew as something of a type.

Having a fuller fulfillment in the Messiah, in the case of a literal virgin, who remained a virgin until the time of the birth of her child, you know, Isaiah must have given a double prophecy in one. There are certain prophecies like that, that have double fulfillment. Something of a limited short-term fulfillment, and then more of a complete and final, ultimate fulfillment.

And the final one is almost always in Christ. There are other cases like that. We'll see that Matthew does some interesting things in quoting Old Testament prophecies.

We won't see it in this lecture, but in chapter 2, Matthew quotes about three or four different Old Testament prophecies. In most cases, he's doing something different with the prophecy than you would guess would be appropriate when you look at those prophecies in the context. We'll discuss that when we come to them.

In any case, I accept the inspiration of Matthew's insights about this. And I believe that the prophecy in Isaiah was about Jesus, and was about his mother being a virgin. But I'm saying there's a bit of complexity in the issue, because in the passage in Isaiah, and in the sequel in the next chapter, it does give the impression that the prophecy has to do with Isaiah's own child.

But there's no reason why Isaiah's own child could not be a type of Christ, as in many cases Old Testament characters are. In which case, the thing that is said about Isaiah's child would also be applied to Christ in a secondary, or maybe a more important primary sense. The child of Isaiah being secondary, though first in history.

Well, if you're sufficiently confused with that, we'll go on. Verse 24, Then Joseph, being aroused from sleep, did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took to him his wife. So apparently they went ahead and got married before the child was born.

And it says he did not sleep with her, didn't have sex with her, until she had brought forth her firstborn son, and he called his name Jesus. Now, on the question of whether Mary remained a virgin, there's more than one scripture that is relevant to the question. There are, of course, those passages that talk about the brethren of Jesus and the sisters of Jesus, though the Roman Catholics who believe that Mary remained perpetually a virgin believe that those brothers and sisters of Jesus were not really brothers in the sense of sons of Mary, but they were maybe cousins or otherwise relatives, which is not an impossible way to understand the language.

The word brother can be used that way in the Bible. However, this verse that we just read, verse 25, would appear to lay to rest any hopes of proving that Mary remained a virgin. It says, first of all, that Joseph did not have sex with her until she brought forth Jesus, which suggests very strongly that normal marital relations began after Jesus was born, between Joseph and Mary.

There would be no reason for them not to begin normal relations. Apparently, since she was pregnant with the Messiah, Joseph felt it inappropriate to get involved at all in a physical relationship with Mary until that whole pregnancy had run its course, it being a sacred and special and supernatural thing. We're not told that God forbade him to have sex with Mary until she had the baby, but it just obviously didn't seem... he didn't feel comfortable getting... I guess he felt he might have defiled that situation somehow and he just kept out of it until the baby was born.

But the implication certainly is there that they began to have regular relations afterwards, which gives reason to believe that the brethren of Jesus spoken of elsewhere were the biological children of Joseph and Mary. Furthermore, in this verse it says that Jesus was Mary's firstborn son. Now, the Roman Catholics who want to say that Mary had no other sons, they just say, well, the word firstborn doesn't necessarily suggest there were others, but it just means... the word firstborn sort of carried the idea of an heir, the person who received the birthright.

Whether other sons were present or not, the firstborn child would be the heir, and Jesus was the heir of Mary's family. But I don't think so. I think we would have to say, if that's the way that the word firstborn was being used, it would be Joseph's firstborn, because it would be the father's inheritance, not the mother's, that the firstborn would inherit.

And if inheritance was somehow in the picture here, it would not be the inheritance of Mary's family, but of Joseph's family that would be at issue. But this says it was Mary's firstborn, suggesting that she bore this one, and then she bore others later. There is really no reason in the world why the word firstborn should have been used here if there were no other children of Mary, and therefore there's obviously a very great uphill struggle for those who want to prove that Mary did not have a regular relationship with her husband after Jesus was born.

Let's turn now to Luke 2, and we begin finally with the birth narratives. Luke 2 and Matthew 2 both contain birth narratives of Jesus, although Luke 2 is chronologically earlier. In Luke, we read of the shepherds visiting Jesus at the night of His birth.

We also read in Luke about Jesus being circumcised on the eighth day of His life. And also of the encounter at that time, or in the early days of His life, we read of the dedication of Jesus in the temple and of meeting with old Simeon and Anna, and the prophecy uttered over Him there. All those things happened within the first few days of His life.

But when you turn to Matthew's version, which we won't in this session, we will probably in the next or so, in Matthew's version in chapter 2, the visit to Jesus is of the wise men. And the wise men did not come when Jesus was in the manger. He was in a house by this time, as we see in the text.

In fact, Jesus may have been as old as two years old, there is some indication, at the time the wise men came. So, while we do have the birth of Jesus in Matthew 2, the events surrounding it are much later, perhaps as much as two years later, as those mentioned in Luke chapter 2. So, we turn to Luke chapter 2 for the next chronological information. It says, And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered.

This would be for taxation purposes. This census took place while Quirinius was governing in Syria. And why Luke mentions this is not altogether clear, except that we know that Luke has already previously, and will again in chapter 3 verse 1, go to great pains to establish the historical nature of what he is saying, and the chronological relationship of what he says with other verifiable historical events.

So, all went to be registered, everyone to his own city. Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into 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 wife, who was with child. Now, not only was she with child by this time, she was very advanced.

She was at the end of her third trimester. In fact, the journey must have taken about a week, but it would appear that the week ended on the day of her giving birth, because

they couldn't even find lodging for the night, having arrived in Bethlehem the very night that they got there, and were unable to find lodging, she had the baby. So, it was a most inconvenient time to make such a journey, for a woman who could give birth at any moment, to make a journey which she probably made on the back of a donkey, although that's a traditional image we have from Christmas time.

We don't know that she rode a donkey, but it's more likely that at nine months pregnant, she rode a donkey rather than walked the distance. But, here's an interesting thing. The Bible predicted that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem.

This is stated in Micah chapter 5, verse 2. And yet, Jesus was in the womb of a woman who didn't live in Bethlehem, or anywhere near there. Bethlehem was no more than about six miles from Jerusalem, down in Judea. That, once again, was probably about a week's journey, moving quickly in those days.

And, you know, in the ninth month of pregnancy, she was probably in no mood to make such trips. Now, one wonders, since God wanted the baby to be born in Bethlehem, why he didn't just reveal it to Joseph in a dream, and say, now Joseph, you probably know, or maybe you're not aware, but Micah said that the baby's got to be born in Bethlehem, so I suggest that at your convenience, you and Mary make a trip down there and establish some lodging, so that the prophecy can be fulfilled. However, it would seem to me that Joseph and Mary were somewhat oblivious to the prophecy.

And we can't fault them for that. They didn't have a Bible. The only Bibles available were chained to the pulpit in the synagogues, and it's not certain whether Joseph or Mary had ever heard the passage from Micah, ever even read.

There's a lot of Old Testament passages they probably never had heard. And it apparently never crossed their mind that the baby should be born in Bethlehem. Why do I say that? Well, because they would have gone at a more convenient time, no doubt.

If they were consciously thinking, wow, we've got to get down to Bethlehem, let's go before it becomes inconvenient and uncomfortable to travel, they probably would have gone earlier in the pregnancy. It would seem that they knew nothing about the prophecy, but God did. But as I say, God could have remedied it by telling them.

He could have told them about the prophecy, and they could have made a more opportune trip when she was not so far along and so advanced. But God wanted to do it a different way, just to show His sovereignty. He did it by putting it in the mind of Caesar Augustus, the most powerful man, politically speaking, in the world, the ruler of the world, really, to make a decree that all the world should be registered.

Now, all the world, of course, just means all the Roman Empire. We've got to get used to that in the Bible. All the world doesn't always mean what we mean by all the world.

Caesar knew that not all the world was under his domain. There were barbarians that he was still at war with that he couldn't tax. And they knew about China and India.

At least they knew about India in those days. Alexander the Great, 300 years earlier, had planned to go and conquer India. So they knew there were parts of the world that were not under the Roman power.

So the world was just a way of saying the Roman world. But here's the thing. Everyone in the Roman Empire had to be inconvenienced to make some kind of journey back to their home city because of a decree that God had this emperor make for no other purpose than to get Mary and Joseph to go to Bethlehem in time for that baby to be born, and just in time.

The timing of the decree must have been perfect because I'm sure that Mary and Joseph would have gone as soon as they knew they had to. And when they knew they had to, they made it down there with no time to spare. They got down there just in time for that prophecy to be fulfilled.

It was just under the wire. God is the God of last-minute solutions. If you live by faith, you'll find this out.

God always supplies every need, but not always when you think it should be supplied. I have found at times in the past that God is not even worried by late notices from creditors. I get worried about them, but God doesn't seem to get worried because he doesn't always provide on the first late notice.

He always provides on time, but he doesn't always provide when I would prefer for him to provide. And I know this from many years' experience, that God just does not fail, but he often takes a delight in making it look like he might. As I said yesterday, the sisters of Lazarus thought that Jesus had waited too long to come.

When they said, If you had been here, my brother would not have died. But it wasn't too late. It only seemed too late to them.

God's timing is sometimes deliberately this way, to stretch our faith and to let circumstances go to the point where it seems like it's impossible for something to happen, and then to show that he's the God who can do things that seem otherwise impossible. With Mary and Joseph a week before the birth of Jesus, still in Nazareth, and a prophecy that required the baby to be born in Bethlehem, how could God pull it off? I mean, there was no time to spare. Well, he could put it in the mind of the ruler of the world to send out orders that everyone in the world go back to their home village.

Now, David was born in Bethlehem, so those who were descended from David had to go back to Bethlehem. Joseph was descended from David, so he had to go register there. It just tells you something about the personality of God, in a way.

You know, that he waits until the very last minute. In fact, we found this in our ministry, especially in Bandon. We always had bills coming in, and we had debts that we were always chipping away at.

We were always trying to keep on time with our payments and everything, and we always managed to do it, and we finally got all our debts paid off. But we found that many times, God would just take us down to the last minute. You may have heard the story about how once we had a \$20,000 payment on our property to make, we had no money.

And the day came, and we were praying that God would send the money, and it didn't come. So we got an extension of 90 days. So we had 90 days for God to provide the money.

So, when that 90 days ran its course, we were praying hard for the money to come, and it didn't come. We got another 90-day extension. And we prayed for those 90 days for the \$20,000 to come, and it didn't come.

At the end of the third... Well, at the end of the second 90-day extension, the lady we owed the money to said, we'll give you one more 90-day extension. We were also paying interest on the lateness. So she wasn't going to lose anything by it, if she ever got the money.

She was going to get what we owed. So it was extended. But the point is that after the second extension, she says, I'll give you one more 90-day extension.

After these 90 days, if you don't have the money, I'm going to have to foreclose on you. Well, we prayed and prayed, and 90 days went by. And on the 90th day, a family walked in and gave us a check for \$20,000.

It happens that they knew we needed it, but they had determined to give it to us before they knew we needed it. Actually, they were a local family, friends of ours, who decided to come to school. They owned a house.

They decided some months earlier to sell their house and pay off all their debts and then give to our school as a donation what was left. And they figured it out months in advance, before they had any idea we would need \$20,000. They figured it out that they would have \$20,000 extra, and they called me up and told me that they were intending to sell their house and do this with it, and they were going to come to the school and give us the \$20,000.

I said, well, that's wonderful. And they put the house up for sale. And here's another last-minute thing.

Their house was for sale through the whole summer, and they were planning to go in the

fall to our school, but they had to sell the house first. And all summer long, one person, only one person came to get it, and that was early in the summer. So for the rest of the summer, no one even came to look at their house.

And we set a deadline that they had to apply no later than 10 days before the school started or something like that. So that was the deadline. They had to have a seller, a buyer for their house.

And sure enough, when it was 10 days before the school was to start, someone out of nowhere came up and bought their house. Someone looked at the house the next day and made an offer and bought it. Then it went into escrow.

Well, escrow often in this country goes for about 30 days, and then they get their money. This escrow, for some reason, got delayed for over 60 days. And no one was quite sure when the money would come through, but they had made a commitment that they would give us the \$20,000 whenever they got the money.

Well, as it turned out, the day their escrow came through, after an extended escrow, was the same day that was the end of our third 90-day extension. In other words, our last chance to pay for the property or lose it. And it was that day they walked in and gave us the check for \$20,000.

Now, also, it was at the last minute that their house sold so that they would come to the school and even be able to give this gift and so forth. We thought that, as Keith Green's ministry is called, Last Days Ministries, he had nothing on us. We decided to dub our ministry Last Minute Ministries because God only provided for us always at the last minute.

And that certainly is what you will learn if you live by faith, is that God usually doesn't provide in advance, and sometimes not even before extensions and late notices have come, but always when it's really needed. Not when it's convenient for you to have it, but when you really need it, God comes through with it. Why He does it that way, instead of making it easier on you, we can only deduce.

But it seems to me that it's in order to show that, well, it stretches our faith. It tests our faith. And it shows, of course, that it's Him when it happens.

I mean, if He provided some time, some distance in advance of the need, by the time the deadline would have come, you would have met it previously and so forth. I mean, you wouldn't immediately connect the provision with the need. You wouldn't see it so clearly as the answer to prayer, as if it comes only at the moment you need it, from out of nowhere.

And that's what He kind of did here. It was the last minute. Here's this couple living in Nazareth.

They've got to get to Bethlehem, but they don't know it. And they've got to get there in a week, because they don't know that either. The baby's going to be born in a week.

And so God works it out that everyone in the Roman Empire is inconvenienced by a decree from the emperor that everyone has to go back to their home village in order just to get that couple to Bethlehem. How much easier it would have been, since angels were already appearing to Mary and Joseph on occasion, to just have an angel tap them on the shoulder and say, Listen, get down to Bethlehem. The prophecy has to be fulfilled down there.

But instead, God delights to show His sovereignty over the rulers of this world. Caesar Augustus, who boasted... Augustus means the revered one. He gave himself that name.

His real name was Octavian. Caesar's name was Octavian, but he called himself Augustus, the revered one, because he accepted worship of himself and divine titles for himself. And he was arrogantly thinking that he was the most powerful ruler of the world.

And on the human level, he appeared to be. But he himself was a mere puppet of God, of whom it says in Proverbs 21.1, The heart of the king is in the hand of the Lord. As the rivers of water, he turns it whether so ever he wills.

Proverbs 21.1. And so we certainly see that in this case. So, Joseph and Mary have to go down to Bethlehem, and they arrive there just in time. Verse 6, it says, So it was that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered.

Now, how do I know they got there just on the right day? Simply this. They weren't able to find lodging. If they had been there earlier, they probably would have been able to obtain lodging.

The appearance in the story certainly is that they managed to find a stable just in time for the baby to be born and put in a manger. No doubt, within a few days after the birth of the baby, they were able to find some more permanent lodging or some more reasonable lodging. But it was obviously an emergency housing situation, which suggests they hadn't gotten there any earlier, or else they probably would have found something more suitable or made more friends.

I mean, we have the impression from the story that they got there just as the baby was due. And she brought forth her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes. Luke, as well as Matthew, refers to him as her firstborn son.

And wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn. Now, this little line, there was no room for him in the inn. Has occasioned a great deal of Christian fiction or elaboration on nonfiction.

Everyone has seen plays or movies that are dramatizations of the Christmas story. And

there's always some kind of an innkeeper who's got some kind of a personality or an attitude or something, you know. And sometimes he's got a portly and generous old wife who says, Oh, come on, honey, give him a look.

She's going to have a baby. Give him a place. Oh, right.

I guess we can find him a place in the stable and so forth. All of that is conjecture. There's not a mention in the whole Bible of an innkeeper or a wife.

All we're told is that the place was crowded. It was choked with people. David had a lot of descendants and they all had to go to the same city to register.

So all these pilgrims from around the empire were in Bethlehem, this tiny town, which was not set up as a tourist trap with all kinds of motels and everything like that. In fact, the inn, what is referred to as the inn, was probably not much more than just a kind of a makeshift encampment of pilgrims. But it must have had some kind of enclosure which would not have allowed more than a certain number of people to be there.

There must have been some kind of way that people obtained space in it because it says there was no room left in it. Mary and Joseph were unable to find such a place. Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night.

And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid. Then the angel said to them, Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

And this will be the sign to you, again a sign that is not particularly supernatural. You will find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. He swaddled.

Swaddling clothes were those that they would wrap a baby in normally. This was not really, swaddling clothes were not some kind of unusual garment for this baby to be wearing. It was unusual though to lay a baby in a manger.

And the angel said, When you find the baby in a manger, then that will be a sign to you that you have found the right one. But the fact that Jesus was in a manger was no miracle. Signs are not always miraculous, although Jesus did many miraculous signs.

We've got to guard against the idea that whenever God says this will be a sign to you, that we're talking always about a miraculous thing. This will be a sign. You'll see the baby wrapped in swaddling clothes.

I don't know if this was still done in Jesus' day. It probably was. I know in former times, in Old Testament times, it was customary to take a newborn baby and rub salt all over its

body to disinfect it.

And then wrap it up almost like a mummy from the neck down and not unwrap it for a full week. I don't know how they dealt with things like defecation and things like that. Maybe they just didn't attend to that for a week.

You just wrap it up nice and tight and you don't worry about what's inside until you open it. And then they would unwrap the baby. They'd unwrap the baby a week later and rub it with salt again and wrap it up again for a while.

I think they only did it twice. But these swaddling clothes no doubt were those kinds of wrappings that they'd wrap babies with. In third world countries where infectious disease claims a lot of infants and there's a high mortality rate in third world countries, no doubt rubbing with salt was not a bad idea.

It probably did kill some of the germs and probably helped the infant to survive. Though it seems like maybe those swaddling clothes should have been changed more frequently. Anyway, and suddenly there was with the angel.

Yes, did you want to say something? No, they waddle. Swaddling. I think I'm not familiar with the word from any other place than this passage, but I imagine to swaddle a child would be to wrap a child.

Yeah, I think I'm not positive, but I believe the word swaddle means to wrap. And so swaddling clothes would be the wrappings that they would ordinarily wrap a baby in. And suddenly there were with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, goodwill toward men.

So it was when the angels had gone away from them into heaven that the shepherds said one to another, Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass which the Lord has made known to us. And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the babe lying in a manger. Now when they had seen him, they made widely known the saying which was told them concerning the child.

And all those who heard it marveled at the things, at those things which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart. Then the shepherds returned glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen as it was told them.

And when eight days were completed for the circumcision of the child, his name was called Jesus. And that was the name given by the angel to him before he was conceived in the womb. Now I hope to comment on these verses.

I wanted to read the whole thing and then make comments. We have a little time to do that. I'd like to first of all point out that the only people who on the night of Jesus' birth

received a divine communication about it were shepherds of Bethlehem.

Why is this? Why weren't the religious leaders informed? Why weren't other godly people of the area informed? Why were shepherds selected more than anyone else? Well, I can't say with certainty that I know the answer to that. We can say this, that taking care of sheep was a vocation that had a long and honorable history in Israel. Although, shepherds were not particularly appreciated in polite society.

City dwellers tended to look down their noses at shepherds, partly because they didn't smell good. We usually think of pigs as a really filthy kind of animal. I've known people who've raised pigs and who've raised sheep, and they say, Pigs are nothing compared to sheep.

If you want to know what a filthy animal is, a smelly animal is, you've got to be around a sheep. Pigs at least don't have a lot of hair to hold the smell in, but sheep do. Anyway, as I understand it, shepherds were not considered to be a very good company to keep.

Although, it wasn't that they had a dishonorable profession. Abraham had been a shepherd, and so had Abel. Going back as far as the second generation of humans, the difference between Cain and Abel as far as their vocation was that Cain tilled the soil, Abel was a shepherd of sheep and offered a lamb to God, and that was acceptable.

Abraham was a shepherd of sheep, so was Isaac, and so was Jacob. Moses was not initially a shepherd. He was raised in the royal household of Pharaoh, but before he could be of any use as a leader, he had to learn how to shepherd sheep.

And so, although, in the culture that Moses was brought up in, which was the Egyptian, shepherds were considered an abomination. The Bible specifically says that in Genesis, that every shepherd is an abomination to the Egyptians. Moses, with those ingrained sensitivities from his upbringing in Egypt, had to humble himself and accept a role that he would have, by his training, felt was an abomination.

And that was the tending of sheep. And he had to spend the same number of years doing that as he had spent living in a palace. Forty years, after which God had him lead the flocks of Israel.

Later, when God rejected Saul from being king, he said, When you were little in your own sight, the Lord called you to be a shepherd to his people. But you have rejected the word of the Lord, therefore the Lord has rejected you from being king, therefore the Lord has sought another man, one after his own heart, to be king. And he actually took a guy, David, who had spent his early years shepherding.

It's interesting how many of the leaders of Israel, Abram, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David, they all had their early lives, or at some point in their lives, a period of time, learning the animal husbandry of shepherding. And, of course, we know David, who was a shepherd,

spoke of his relationship with God that way, and said, The Lord is my shepherd. And he drew parallels from his own experience in shepherding sheep with his relationship to God.

Likewise, the prophets spoke of the Messiah, sometimes as a shepherd that God would send. Particularly, we think of Ezekiel 34, where God says, I will shepherd my people, I will send one shepherd, David, to rule over them, and so forth. Talking about Israel as his flock.

All of these things may be points of interest, but they don't necessarily explain why shepherds were selected to be the first ones to receive knowledge of Jesus. But, probably because they were of the same vocation as David. David had been a shepherd on those same hills where they were.

In fact, I wouldn't wish to guess too much, but it's not impossible that these shepherds could trace their lineage back to David. They lived in the city of David. Millions of people could trace their lineage back to David at that time, probably, or not millions, but thousands.

Very probably, the shepherds in Bethlehem were descendants of David themselves. Or of Jesse, at least, of his family. It's possible that they were the 1,000 years removed successors of David himself, who shepherded his sheep on those hills outside of Bethlehem.

And here, David was a type of Christ, and therefore Jesus was born in the same place David was. And Jesus was to be a shepherd too, as he later said in John chapter 10, I am the good shepherd of the sheep. And while none of those things tell us exactly why God chose shepherds, we can see that shepherds are not an insignificant vocation.

And for the shepherd king of Israel, Jesus, to be born in the very town where the former shepherd king of Israel, David, had been born, and to be visited by local shepherds, who were probably the direct successors of those grazing pastures from David himself, and where his sheep had grazed. Somehow that just seems poetically just. It just seems to be somehow fitting.

The whole significance of Bethlehem, of course, was that it was the city of David. And David never lived there after he gave up shepherding. The whole time that David shepherded sheep was in Bethlehem.

The whole time he lived in Bethlehem, he shepherded sheep. When he left Bethlehem, he became attached to the court of Saul, and didn't shepherd sheep anymore. So David's town was the town where David was a shepherd.

That's where Jesus had to be born, because he was fulfilling a type. He was the second David, the second shepherd king. And therefore, there seems some, I don't know, primal

appropriateness to shepherds of that same pasture land to be the ones that God speaks to, as he had spoken to David on those same hills in the writing of the Psalms so many times.

Well, anyway, whether we have discovered any reason for it or not, we can see that this is the case. Important people were not notified. Only shepherds were.

And the shepherds spread the news around, but by the time they did, they probably couldn't locate the baby again. I'm sure that Mary and Joseph didn't stay in the stable for very many days. In all likelihood, it was just an emergency crash pad because of the need to have a place to have the baby.

I'm sure by the next day, they located something more appropriate as a place to stay, which means that the shepherds, after leaving, would probably not be able to trace him down again. The evidence would indicate that Jesus and his family remained fairly obscure during the early years of his life. So much so, in fact, that even though Simeon prophesied over the baby Jesus, and Anna spoke of him to all those who were looking for the redemption of Israel, yet it would seem that Israel lost track of him after that.

You'd think that devout people would keep track and say, well, I'm going to watch this kid. Let's see where his parents moved to. Let's see what happens to them.

But their movements were somewhat secretive. They had to flee in the middle of the night from Bethlehem to go to Egypt, and they were there for who knows how long. No one was notified of their return from Egypt.

And then they moved up to Nazareth, and those who had been informed in Bethlehem and in Jerusalem about the birth of Jesus must certainly have entirely lost track of him. So that when he reappeared as an adult preaching in those regions, it's not known whether anybody would have recognized him or had any way of connecting him with that baby that was announced by the shepherds and by Simeon and so forth to be the Messiah. Anyway, the angels come.

And first it's one angel, and he simply gives the message that Jesus has been born. He says, Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord. These three titles for Jesus are mentioned at the very beginning.

He is a Savior, he is the Christ, and he is the Lord. And therefore, of course, to believe any one thing about Jesus must involve you in the belief in the other two as well. Now, by the way, I might just say this, because I have had much experience, and you probably have had some, talking to people who are of the New Age philosophy.

The New Age movement uses the word Christ a great deal. In fact, some of the principle texts written by New Age leaders talk about the reappearance of the Christ. Of course, what they're talking about is not what we talk about when we say Christ.

They're talking about something that was, well, they're talking about Christ consciousness. They're basically saying that the Christ is the essence of God that dwells in us all, and that everyone is Christ if only they knew it. If only they got illuminated or enlightened, if they could only see it, they would be like Jesus.

Jesus was the Christ, they say, but he was just the Christ in the same sense that any of us may be. He happened to be more enlightened in his generation than others. He knew that he was God.

Others didn't know that they were. He knew that he was Christ, but others didn't realize that they were. This is how the New Age talks about Christ, as if Christ is some kind of a spiritual essence or something.

In fact, the Gnostics of the 2nd and 3rd century taught that Jesus was not born the Christ, that the Christ was sort of an essence that came upon him, very much a New Age idea, very much like the modern New Age. The Gnostics, which were a heretical group, taught that Jesus became the Christ at his baptism, that the Christ Spirit came upon him when he was baptized, and left him just before he died. And this was the occasion of Jesus saying, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Because the Christ Spirit had lifted from him, and he was not the Christ prior to his baptism or at the point of his death.

Now, there are special Gnostic reasons for saying all that, but it's heretical. And I think it was Corinthianism, which was the branch of Gnosticism that taught that particular thing, that the Christ was sort of an essence or a spirit that came upon Jesus at his baptism and left him before his death. And he was not the Christ before that, he was just an ordinary guy, just an ordinary carpenter.

Now, the Scripture, of course, doesn't allow for this, and the whole concept of the Christ in the Bible is totally different than that of the New Age or of the Gnostics. Because the Christ is just the Greek equivalent for the Hebrew word Messiah. They both mean the same thing, and one is simply a translation of the other.

In Psalm chapter 2, it says that the nations conspire against the Lord and against his Messiah. In the New Testament, the same psalm is quoted, they conspire against the Lord and against his Christ, because Christ is the equivalent of Messiah. The Messiah was not some kind of spiritual essence that dwelt in every man or came upon people.

The Messiah referred to a particular historical person that was expected, prophetically expected, and that the Messiah was the anointed one, there's only one who could be the Messiah. And many specific prophecies were said about him, he'd be born in Bethlehem, and so forth. He'd come through this lineage.

The word Messiah had all that information. It referred to a particular expected person

who would meet certain prophetic qualifications. When the Bible says Jesus was the Christ, it doesn't mean that he realized his Christhood better than other people do, who might also do so.

Or that the Christ was something that came upon him. It's simply saying, he's that one. He's the Messiah.

He's the predicted, anointed one. No one else is or ever will be. The predictions were about him and not about anyone else.

He is the Christ. He didn't become the Christ as baptism at his birth. Unto you is born a Savior who is Christ.

And he is the Lord. And the Lord means the master and owner and the one to be obeyed. Which means that the very first announcement that Jesus was the Savior was accompanied by the announcement that he was also the Christ and the Lord.

And you cannot separate these titles and let him be your Christ but not your Lord, or your Lord not your Christ, or your Savior not your Lord, or something like that. All these things are simply different ways of speaking about the same person. You either have him, or you don't have him.

If you have him, you have a Lord and a Savior. And you have the Messiah. Now, they're told to go looking for a baby in a manger.

They're not told particularly the street address. And there must have been a number of stables in Bethlehem. It was not a huge town, but they must have had to look from one person's stable to the next to see if there were any babies in there.

Eventually they went and they found. Now, after the angel had made his announcement, a multitude of angels filled the sky singing praises to Jesus. This would have been no doubt very impressive to see in the middle of the night.

The sky illuminated with these superhuman persons singing. Probably sounded better than the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, I would guess. With flawless vocal chords, singing heavenly composed songs of praise and hymnody to Jesus.

Of course, we know there are songs like that sung to Jesus in the book of Revelation also. In the book of Hebrews, chapter 1, and verse 6. Hebrews 1, 6 says, But when he again brings the firstborn into the world, he says, Let all the angels of God worship him. Now, this statement has been subject to different translations.

The New King James says, When he again brings his firstborn into the world. Which suggests when he brings him back the second time. The second coming of Jesus.

However, some translations just say, Again, when he brings his firstborn into the world.

Meaning, again means here's another point. When God brought Jesus into the world, that is the first time.

He commanded all the angels to worship him. It could be read either way. Depending on where you put the word again.

It can either be a reference to the first coming or the second coming. Well, we know at least that at his first coming, all the angels worshipped him. There was a multitude of them worshipping him and singing his praise.

Which the shepherds heard. Whether there will be a similar choir like that at his second coming, remains to be seen. And it depends largely on whether Hebrews 1, 6 is talking about the first or second coming of Christ.

But it does refer to all the angels worshipping Jesus. And that's important when you consider the question of the deity of Christ. Because, of course, the Bible is very explicit.

You shall worship no one other than Jehovah God. And angels were not allowed to be worshipped. And men were not allowed to be worshipped.

But only God was allowed to be. Yeah, John. It doesn't talk about angels in Romans 8, 29.

Okay, well that's Philippians 2, 10. I think. Yeah, that every knee shall bow.

And every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. But certainly, if the angels have knees, that would include theirs. In heaven and on earth.

Right. Of course, there are humans in heaven and humans on earth, both. But I personally agree with your implication that the angels also are included in those that must worship him.

And the demons as well, eventually, must do so, in my opinion. That is Philippians 2, 10. Right.

That the angels worshipped Jesus is proof positive that he's God. Because even humans can't worship anyone but God. So, I'm sure the angels don't worship anyone but God.

Okay, now, they say in verse 14. The song of these angels is glory to God in the highest. And on earth peace, good will toward men.

At least that's how we've traditionally come to understand it. That's how it's rendered in the King James. And therefore, it's preserved that way here.

Actually, some translators feel like it should be translated peace toward men of good will. Now, either translation could be correct. And either statement would make some sense.

Glory to God in the highest means in the highest heavens. Up in heaven, there's glory to God. And on earth, in contrast to up in heaven, there's peace.

Okay. Two things are announced here. One is the conditions in heaven.

And the other is the conditions in earth. In the highest means in heaven. Glory to God.

God is going to be glorified in heaven by the birth of Jesus and by the outworking. Because it would be the demonstration of God's faithfulness and power and goodness. And keeping his promises and saving his people from oppressors that were too great for them.

The devil and his angels. God would receive glory in heaven through this. But something would happen on earth also.

On earth, peace. Now, the latter clause is what is debated. Is it peace, good will toward men? In other words, just saying that there's going to be peace on earth.

And God's good will is toward mankind. It could mean that. God does really have good will toward mankind.

Although part of the message of John the Baptist and Jesus was that God wasn't exactly ready to express good will toward everybody right then. He was about ready to judge anybody who didn't receive Jesus. It is probably better to render it along with the more modern translations in this case that say, On earth, peace toward men of good will.

That means that God has come to establish reconciliation or peace with men whose hearts are right. Men of good will. Men with good intentions.

It's clear that the people that failed to receive Jesus did not fail to receive him because they didn't have enough evidence of who he was. It's that they didn't have pure enough motives. But those, even the simple minded who had pure motives, God was coming to bring them into peace with him.

It's motives are everything. Good will suggests your motivations. Your pure intentions.

And to say that the angels were announcing that God was about to establish on earth peace with men who are of good will. Men who are purely motivated. As Jesus later said, Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

That is probably the meaning of the angels' song here. Now, as far as peace goes, does that mean the peace between those men and God or peace among themselves? It could be either, of course, because these people did, through Jesus, come into peace with God, but also peace with each other. And that is something that we value as well.

We value peace with God, but we also value peace on earth. And it does seem to be

speaking about conditions on earth. Now, this doesn't mean that Jesus came to bring an end to war.

In fact, Jesus discouraged his disciples from thinking any such thing. From thinking that he had come to bring an end to all war and all strife and so forth. He said in Matthew chapter 7, Do not think that I have come to bring peace on the earth.

I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. I'm looking right now at it. It's verse 34.

Matthew 10, 34. Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.

Which implies that his coming was not going to bring an instant end of all war. Actually, the word sword in the parallel statement in Luke is replaced with division. In the parallel in Luke it says, I didn't come to bring peace, but division.

And no doubt, sword here in that sense is symbolic of division. The parallel is in Luke 12, 49. But the point here is that Jesus came to bring peace to men of good will.

But not everyone is going to receive him. Not all men were men of good will. And don't expect there to be global peace as a result of my coming.

There's still going to be strife. There's still going to be division. There's still going to be war.

But there will be peace among men of good will. We can see that in Ephesians chapter 2. If you would look there. Ephesians chapter 2. There Paul is talking about the former hostility that existed between Gentiles and Jews prior to them coming into Christ.

But in Ephesians 2, 13 he says, but now in Christ Jesus you who were once far off. That is the Jews and the Gentiles were far off from each other. The Gentiles were alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, he says a few verses earlier.

You too who were far from each other before have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace who has made both into one and has broken down the middle wall of separation. Having abolished in his flesh the enmity that is the law of commandments.

And verse 16 says that he might reconcile them both to God, the Jews and the Gentiles, both in one body through the cross. Thereby putting to death the enmity. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off, the Gentiles, and also to those who were near, the Jews.

To bring them near to each other and to make peace between them. This is what Paul is talking about. The Jews and the Gentiles used to be alienated, hostile, enmity with each other.

But God has made peace in Christ between them. So men of good will who were once hostile to each other, in Christ they put aside their hostilities. And that could be what the angels are suggesting.

When it says on earth, not only is there going to be glory to God in heaven, but there's going to be changes in relationships on earth. Men of good will will be at peace with each other. Those divisive things like race or nation or gender or whatever that divided people before will no longer be permitted to be occasions for alienation.

But God in Jesus makes peace toward all those who are men of good will. And so the shepherds came, we see, and they saw Jesus. And it says in verse 17, when they saw him, when they had seen him, they made widely known the saying which was told them concerning this child.

Now, there were a lot of pilgrims from all over the empire probably, especially all over Israel there in Bethlehem, because of this decree of Caesar to go there for taxation registration. And for the shepherds to go and spread this around means that a lot of those people, when they went back to wherever it is they came from, must have taken with them something of an awareness that the Messiah had been born, even if they had not yet seen him themselves. They had this wild story from these shepherds that they'd seen angels and they'd seen the baby, and it had all been just as they were told by the angels.

And no doubt many people like Mary herself pondered these things in their hearts and took those stories back with them, back to other parts of the empire and other parts of the country, so that that might have in some sense paved the way or primed people for the coming of Christ later on and to have Christ preach to them. Some, no doubt, would have some vague recollection, if not a clear one, of the fact that someone about 30 years earlier had been saying a baby had been born with angels singing and so forth. So these people from all over the empire heard it from the shepherds.

It says, all those who heard it marveled at those things that were told them by the shepherds. But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart. I've already commented on that.

That took a tremendous amount of self-restraint on her part, not to gab about these marvelous things the angels had said about her son. Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen as it was told them. And as far as we know, they never saw Jesus again.

Although it is possible, in their old age, they may have become believers in Christ. It's interesting to think about that. Because Jesus disappeared now, from the public's view, for 30 years from this point, but reappeared with a vengeance, as it were, so to speak.

Not with a vengeance in the sense that he came in vengeance, but big time. He reappeared and was preaching in Galilee and down in Judea from time to time. And if these shepherds were still alive, and some of them probably were 30 years later, many of them must have put two and two together and realized that this is the same guy that they saw as a baby.

It's kind of interesting to think of them. They are never given any... The shepherds are never given any attention in the later chapters of the Gospels. We have no record of any of them renewing contact with Jesus after 30 years and saying, Hey, I saw you were in your baby.

You know, I know who you are. The angels told me about you. It's also possible that these shepherds may have died or something in the meantime.

The life expectancy of people in the old days was not as much as today. Some of them, since they were probably in their adult years already when the angels appeared to them, 30 years later may have been old or dead. Anyway, just interesting questions that we don't have answers to about what became of these shepherds.

One more verse, verse 21. And when eight days were completed for the circumcision of the child, his name was called Jesus, so named by the angel before he was conceived in the womb. Now, this verse tells us two things.

Of course, it tells us that the instructions of the angel were carried out, that the parents did name him Jesus, but that would go without saying. I mean, in a sense, we would assume that they would follow the angel's instructions, and we certainly see him called that later in the Gospels. The main bit of information this verse contributes has to do with his circumcision.

Jesus was subjected to circumcision. Now, I have two sons who have been circumcised. I myself was circumcised as an infant.

Praise God, I don't remember it. But I do remember my son's circumcisions. I was with Benjamin when he was circumcised on the eighth day, and I vowed I'd never be with another of my sons again.

I said, Honey, you take him in. You can't relate. My wife takes the sons in to get circumcised now.

But it is torture, man. It is torture. I'm surprised that the Child Protective Services haven't outlawed circumcision yet as child abuse.

It's amazing. I mean, it's excruciating. Now, the eighth day is supposed to be the most tolerable day because, as you may have heard, science now has demonstrated that the eighth day of a child's life is that only day in their life when their vitamin K level in their

blood is at its highest peak.

It peaks out at the eighth day and then it diminishes, and vitamin K is useful to facilitate healing of wounds, and some would say even to make wounds less painful. I don't know whether that's true or not. My children seemed to be fairly in pain at the time.

But the eighth day was the day that God selected for the day for children to be circumcised. And Jesus was not spared this. Although Jesus brought the new covenant, although Jesus brought in an institution that made it unnecessary for us to be circumcised, he was not spared it himself.

Why? Well, perhaps for the same reason they had to be baptized. Remember when he came to John to be baptized? John said, You should baptize me, not me baptize you. And Jesus said, Well, just go along with the system.

He said, It's proper for us to fulfill all righteousness. In other words, I need to go through all the steps that righteousness would require of any man. All the inconveniences, even the unnecessary ones.

There was no reason why Jesus would have to be baptized except that he was just going through all the motions, fulfilling every requirement that God made on man, so that he'd leave none unfulfilled. In Galatians chapter 4, by the way, Galatians is a book that is written to prove, and the main theme of Galatians is that Gentile believers do not have to be circumcised to be Christians. That's the theme of Galatians.

Circumcision is unnecessary. It says in Galatians chapter 4, verse 4 and 5, But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law. Jesus had to be subject to all the things of the law required, including circumcision.

Why? Verse 5, to redeem those who were under the law that they might receive adoption as sons. Now what he's saying is that Jesus went through it all so he could redeem us from having to go through it all. He was a son of God already without being circumcised.

I mean, he was God's son by birth, but he subjected himself to the law so that he could redeem us from the law and give us an inheritance as sons. And part of being under the law was that he had to be circumcised. Now in Colossians chapter 2, there's an interesting reference to the circumcision of Christ.

Although the expression, the circumcision of Christ, can be taken two different ways. In Colossians 2, verse 11, it says, In him, that is in Christ, you also were circumcised with the circumcision made without hands by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ, buried with him in baptism, in which you also were raised with him through the faith and the working of God who raised him from the dead. Now when it says the circumcision of Christ, it certainly could mean the circumcision performed by

Christ.

It could certainly mean that he's talking about the circumcision of the heart, which is not made by hands, but is made by Christ. Man circumcises the foreskins of a Jewish baby, but only God circumcises the heart. And maybe that circumcision of Christ simply means the circumcision which Christ has performed on your heart.

But it's also possible that the circumcision of Christ refers to Jesus' own experience of being circumcised. His circumcision. Why would that be suggested here? Because it says, In him, you also were circumcised.

It goes on to say, We were buried with him, and in baptism we were raised with him. To say we were in Christ, as Paul frequently does, means that what happened to Christ is counted as having happened to us. We died in Christ.

We rose in Christ. We ascended in Christ. We're seated in Christ in heavenly places.

We were circumcised in Christ. And that's a way that Paul often means to say, It didn't really happen to us, but it happened to him. And since we are in him, what he went through is counted on our account as having happened to us.

So to say we are circumcised in Christ, with the circumcision of Christ. It could be saying that since Jesus went through circumcision, we were circumcised in him. And therefore that fulfills all the requirements of the law for all time for those who are in Christ.

We don't have to be circumcised because he was. So the suffering of Christ on our behalf didn't begin on the cross. It began when he was eight days old, or prior.

He actually shed his blood. He actually was wounded for our transgressions and so forth to redeem us from the law that he was under. So that we might not have to endure such things.

Now I know you're going to say, Well then why do you circumcise your sons? And why are you circumcised if we don't have to do it? Well, there's some belief there's health reasons for it. That would be the only reason I would do it. And that's what we practice.

But as far as a religious requirement, the Bible makes it plain. That because Jesus fulfilled all the law, we do not have to be under the law. And he was circumcised in him, we were circumcised.

And therefore we don't need for religious or righteousness purposes to be circumcised. Or as a legal requirement. Next time, we'll continue the story.