

Mystery of Christmas

Previously we looked at “The Miracle of Christmas” and discovered that the miracle was the virgin birth. The virgin birth occurred about 2,000 years ago (2 B.C.). The prophecy was given about 700 B.C. Jesus had no human father; instead he was conceived in Mary by the Holy Spirit. That was the miracle of Christmas!

The second most important fact of Christmas deals with what I call the mystery of Christmas. It is mentioned in Isaiah 7:14 where the prophet says,

Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel. Isaiah 7:14 (NASB)

That is the prophecy that was given 700 years before Jesus actually was born. It predicted the virgin birth. It predicted what we call the miracle of Christmas. It also, interestingly enough, predicts the mystery of Christmas.

BIRTH OF JOHN THE BAPTIST. The mystery of Christmas is found in Luke 1. The Christmas account in Luke 1 starts with the prophecy of John the Baptist’s birth. We are told that the angel Gabriel visited the priest, Zacharias, while he was in the temple performing his service before the Lord. The angel announced that Zacharias and his wife would have a child, and the child’s name would be John. (In time John came to be called John the Baptist). He would be the forerunner of the Messiah.

We also learn that Gabriel visited Mary six months later in verse 26. The account reads,

Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the descendants of David; and the virgin’s name was Mary. And coming in, he said to her, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” But she was very perplexed at this statement, and kept pondering what kind of salutation this was. The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall

name Him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no end.” Luke 1:26-33



(NASB)

What happened to Mary is very interesting. This young woman may still have been in her teens when the angel visited her. I doubt the angel came through a door. He probably just appeared inside the room. Mary saw the angel, and learned that she would have a child to be named Jesus.

THE MYSTERY OF CHRIST. In verse 34 we are told that she asked the right question.

Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a

virgin?” Luke 1:34 (NASB)

How could she have a child when she was a virgin? Apparently her marriage was still a long ways off; so she is asking the right question. Verse 35 gives us the angel’s reply,

The angel answered and said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy Child shall be called the Son of God.” Luke 1:35 (NASB)

The angel gives a simple answer that is impossible to understand. He said the Holy Spirit would come upon Mary and she would conceive a child. That is the miracle of Christmas, but the mystery of Christmas is different. The mystery of Christmas is found in the very last part of this verse. It says, “For that reason, the holy child shall be called the Son of God.” The mystery of Christmas is that the child will be the Son of God.

In Isaiah 7:14, the mystery also appears at the very end of the verse. The end of the verse is,

... she will call His name Immanuel. Isaiah 7:14 (NASB)

The word Immanuel means “God with us.” The mystery of Christmas is the fact that Mary’s son would be God and man. Jesus was both God and man. He would be the God-man.

Now you may ask, “Since Luke 1:35 says the holy child shall be called the Son of God, how do we know that the words ‘Son of God’ refer to the fact that He would be God?” The answer is found in John 10:34-36 where Jesus is talking with the Jewish religious leaders. They have accused Jesus of committing blasphemy. They have accused Him of claiming to be God. In that verse Jesus asks, “Do you accuse me of blasphemy because I have said that I am the Son of God?” There the meaning of the phrase “Son of God” is revealed as the religious leaders understood it to mean that Jesus was indeed claiming to be God.

When the apostles wrote the New Testament, they referred to Jesus as the Son of God. To the Jews that meant

that Jesus was God. That is what the phrase means now and meant then. Jesus defined the term for us. We do not have to ask someone. We do not have to guess. We do not have to pick up a Bible commentary or a Bible dictionary. All we have to do is look at John 10:34. Jesus defined the term for us. Son of God means God. So when the angel Gabriel said that the child shall be called the Son of God, that meant that this child would be God.

MYSTERY OF THE GOD-MAN. The next question is, “How can it be that Jesus was the Son of God?” How is it that this child would be God? There is an interesting fictitious story told of a mouse and elephant. It begins with the elephant in a river enjoying himself. He was taking up water with his trunk and then spraying himself and splashing in the water. This elephant was just having one grand old time, just like a little kid in a bathtub. Also, there was a mouse on the sandy shore of the river. The mouse was really unhappy, absolutely miserable. After looking at this elephant he finally yelled out, “Come out of the water at once!” The elephant laughed and said, “Why should I come out?” The mouse said to himself, “I do not like being ignored.” So he started repeating his demand, “Come out, come out, come out, come out, come out at once!” After a while the elephant began to realize that in order to get any kind of peace and quiet, he would have to come out of the river and do what the mouse wanted him to do. So the elephant slowly, little by little, lumbered out of that river, out of the water, and walked up to the mouse. He looked down at the mouse, and said, “Now, why did you want me to come out?” The mouse looked up at him and said, “I just wanted to see if you were wearing my bathing suit.” Now can you imagine a tiny little mouse’s bathing suit on a huge elephant? That is just an incredible thought.

I think it is easier for us to think of the impossibility of an elephant wearing a small mouse’s bathing suit than it is for us to imagine God becoming like us. It is easier to think of that tiny bathing suit somehow being stretched and fitting an elephant than it is for God, who is beyond our imagination, to become like us.

When Jesus was born, He was God in human flesh. Now let us discover how this happened. How is it that God

became like us? How is it that God became a man, walked among us, and had the ministry He did? How did this really happen? Philippians 2:5-8 gives us that answer. The Apostle Paul, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, wrote this passage. Paul used Jesus as an illustration of one who was not selfish. In Philippians 2:3-5 Paul wrote this,

Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus . . . Philippians 2:3-5 (NASB)

He says, “Do not be selfish.” Do not look out just for your own personal interests, but look out for the interests of other people. Then in verse 5 he makes a profound statement.

Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ.

Existed in the Form of God. He says just as Jesus was not selfish, we are to be selfless. Then he states in verse 6,

. . . who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped . . . Philippians 2:6 (NASB)

Now this verse is loaded with important theological truth. The question is what does it mean that He existed in the form of God? What does that mean? The Greek word for “existed” here actually has the idea that He existed in the very essence, the very nature of God. The Greek tense indicates a present participle which implies continuing action. So Paul said that Jesus existed as God in the past, and He just continues existing as God. He was and is totally God. You miss that message in your English Bibles. Jesus never, ever changed. Philippians 2:6 says,

. . . He existed in the form of God . . .

The Greek word for “form” is *morphe*. It has the idea of the

“very nature and character.” That is, Jesus was the exact image of God in His attributes and outward appearance.

Equality With God. Jesus was God in every way, shape, and form. In the last part of verse 6 we are told,

. . . did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped . . .

The word “equality” just implies equal. All it is saying is He was equal to God, and this equality was not something He tried to grasp or cling to. The Greek word, *harpagmos*, that is translated as “grasped” has the idea of holding onto something. So when Jesus came down from above, He did not try to hang onto His deity. Now you ask, “What does that mean?” The answer is given in verse 7. It says,

. . . but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Philippians 2:7 (NASB)

Form of a Bondservant. Now let us take the last part of the verse. We will skip the key word, “emptied” for a minute, and just look at the last part of the verse. It says, “and He took the form of a bondservant.” Since the Greek word for “form” is once again *morphe*, we understand this to mean that Jesus had the same attributes and outward appearance that a man has. This reveals that Jesus was a man in His appearance, while still remaining God. He was totally God and totally man. It is a mystery. It is the mystery of Christmas. How can that be?

Emptied Himself. Now we consider the key word which is “empty.” We want to talk about this stunning little word because it tells that when Jesus came here, He emptied Himself. And the question is, of what did He empty Himself? He gave up His divine prerogatives. John 5:30 describes one prerogative He gave up,

I can do nothing on My own initiative. As I hear, I judge; and My judgment is just, because I do not seek My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me. John 5:30 (NASB)

What did Jesus say? He said, “I can do nothing on my own initiative.” Do you know what He did? When Jesus became

a man, He gave up His right of divine choice, He gave up His right to make independent decisions. When He came to this earth, He subjected Himself completely to God the Father, the first person of the Trinity.

Matthew 24 describes another prerogative Jesus gave up. Matthew 24:36 says,

But of that day and hour...

Jesus was talking about the future, the Second Coming. He said,

But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone. Matthew 24:36 (NASB)

Now, I have a question for you. If Jesus is God and knows everything, why did He not know the date of His second coming? Why is it that only the Father knows this? We can understand that the angels do not know everything, but why is it that Jesus did not know everything if He is God? That is because when He became a man, He emptied Himself and did not hang onto His prerogative to know all things. He was willing to limit the use of His divine prerogative. He did not lose His attribute of omniscience; He just limited the use of it.

Luke 2:52 confirms this conclusion. When we come to Luke 2:52, Jesus is a youth. Verse 52 says,

And Jesus kept increasing in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men. Luke 2:52 (NASB)

Now my question is: if Jesus is God, why did He need to increase in wisdom? When He became a human man, He limited the use of His total, absolute, complete, awesome wisdom. He was willing to limit Himself so that He could experience what it was like to be like us. How could He ever know what it was like to be one of us if He had total knowledge, if He had total wisdom?

Now let us read Luke 5:17. This is a very stunning verse. The verse says,

One day He was teaching; and there were some Pharisees and teachers of the law sitting there, who had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem; and the power of the Lord was present for Him to perform healing. Luke 5:17 (NASB)

Do you realize what that says? It says power was available for Jesus to perform miracles. The implication is that the power of the Holy Spirit was not always present. A review of the New Testament reveals that the Holy Spirit was with Jesus when He was tempted. Jesus was anointed by the Spirit every time He healed. The Spirit was there when He died on the cross. The Spirit was responsible for bringing Him back to life. The Spirit was present from the beginning of His ministry, throughout His ministry, through His death, and at His resurrection. Jesus limited the use of His own power. When He came into this world, His power was limited. That is the third divine prerogative He limited.

Another divine attribute that He limited is found in John 17:5. Jesus is approaching His death on the cross and He is praying. In His prayer He says the following:

Now, Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was. John 17:5 (NASB)

Jesus said here that He had glory before He came to earth and took on human flesh. When you think of God in His glory, what do you imagine? Do you think of God looking just like us? Or do you think of God with His Shekinah glory? In Revelation 4 we find that God appears like a rainbow. He appears in emerald light mixed with red. He is like a prism. He is a rainbow of colors. In Isaiah 6 God appears as a rainbow again.

In John 17:5 Jesus refers to the glory that He had before He came down to earth. But when He walked among us, Jesus did not look like a prism. Do you think Jesus was aglow with light all around Him? He did not shine like that at all. Jesus said, "Now Father, glorify me together with yourself with the glory that I had with you before the world was." He said, "I would like to have the glory that I had when I was with you."

In Hebrews 1:3, the writer of Hebrew writes,

And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature . . . Hebrews 1:3 (NASB)

When Jesus came to this earth, He limited His glory. He did not shine like He used to shine except on one occasion. Do you remember His appearance on the Mount of Transfiguration in Matthew 17:1-8? At the Mount of Transfiguration, Jesus blazed like the sun. He glowed like the sun. His Shekinah glory was on display. Jesus was and is God and man. He was God and limited the use of divine prerogatives. He never ceased to be God, but He limited Himself so that He could live life as you and I do. But He also did it because His end goal was not to continue to live here forever. His goal was to end up dying for us.

In the Gospels we are told that Jesus was hungry, sleepy, walked, and became tired. These are all indications that Jesus was really and truly a man.

Years ago a Jehovah's Witness came to the door of my home. I thought I knew a lot about the Bible and that I could answer all their questions. I remember they came to the door, and so I stepped outside. I was prepared to talk with them about what they believed. They showed me a passage where it referred to Jesus being a man. Suddenly, I realized I did not know how to answer the woman. I did not know how to respond. After she left, I remembered that Jesus was both God and man. Sometimes scripture focuses on Jesus as a man. Other times the scripture has Jesus in view as God. We must remember that Jesus was both.

CONCLUSION. The miracle of Christmas was important so that He did not enter this world with a sin nature. The mystery of Christmas is important so that He could live life as a sinless man. Both the miracle and mystery of Christmas are absolutely essential so that Jesus could die on a cross as the perfect Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world—takes away your sin and takes away my sin.

There is a true story told about a farmer who one cold winter night heard some rapping on one of his windows. The rapping was irregular. After a while he became annoyed, and decided to go over to the window, and see what was

going on. He pulled back the curtain and noticed that there were some sparrows pecking at the window periodically. He could tell they were cold, and were drawn to the warm heat coming off the window. The farmer felt compassion for these sparrows. So he bundled himself up with clothes and went outside. He opened the barn door and retrieved some hay, and then took some saltine crackers and with these started making a trail. He broke up the saltine crackers to leave a trail from the window where the sparrows were to the barn. Then he hid himself in the hopes that the sparrows would come, pick up the saltine crackers and find their way into the warm barn. The sparrows did not come, and the sparrows did not come. So after a while, the farmer went back into the woods and tried to scare them to move them towards the house where hopefully they would find the saltine crackers. But everything he tried was a failure; nothing ever happened. The sparrows had fled because they saw a big, alien being, whom they did not recognize. They were afraid to come close to the house while he was outside. Eventually the farmer realized that all of his attempts were a failure. So he went back into the house where he got comfortable again. After a little bit, the noise on the window occurred again. The farmer went and looked, and sure enough, they were there again. He started asking himself, "Why do they not understand? Why do they not understand?" Eventually he began to realize, "If only I could become a sparrow, then I could help them understand. Then I could help them find the crackers. I could help them find the warmth." Then this farmer, who was a Christian, began to realize the truth of Jesus becoming a man. Jesus had to become a baby to help us know and understand truth about the Father. Jesus had to become a man to show us how much He loved us, and to die for our sins. Jesus had to become a man to make all of these things possible. Jesus had to become a man to help us obtain forgiveness of our sins, and someday to live with Him eternally. Thank you, Father, for the gift of Your Son.