

From Christmas to Calvary: A light shines in the gloom

For two millennia, Christians have been inspired and consoled by the Gospel accounts of Jesus' birth. Luke, especially, goes into exquisite detail about the events surrounding the Savior's birth and adds touches of glorious gentleness.

An archangel announces his coming to a surprised Virgin Mary. Joseph and Mary travel to Bethlehem for the census. The baby is born in a manger and lovingly wrapped in swaddling clothes. Shepherds watching their flocks hear the good news. Angels sing songs of praise.

To those who are surprised and shocked at what they hear, the angel adds words of reassurance. Matthew, Mark and John add more perspective, presenting the birth of the Savior through lenses that help us grasp the magnitude of what has taken place.

Age-old struggles

It is fascinating to notice that, even as they proclaim the wonder of this birth, the evangelists also give clear hints of what is to come.

Innocents are slaughtered when Herod fears the loss of his power to a new king. Joseph and Mary are forced to flee to Egypt until Herod's death. Simeon prophesies that Mary's heart will be pierced with a sword. Even the gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh point beyond themselves, to Calvary.

In a mysterious and astounding way, the proclamation of the birth of Jesus contains an implicit proclamation of his death.

Doesn't this Gospel approach spoil the party? Wouldn't it be more joyous simply to spend time reflecting on Jesus' beautiful birth? After all, everyone deserves respite from bad news, and birth is a cause for joy. Isn't Christmas supposed to be a time of truce and consolation?

The scriptural approach to Jesus' birth is beautiful precisely because the New Testament situates it in the midst of world events and age-old human struggles. Matthew offers the genealogy



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of Jesus as a deeply symbolic historical perspective of his place in the Father's unfolding plan of salvation.

Foreshadowing salvation

Jesus is born into a land of strife and political oppression. Joseph and Mary are subject to the laws — and taxes — of

the Roman Empire. They become exiles because of a king's paranoia. They live a largely hidden life of poverty, the details of which we know very little.

In other words, the Christmas foreshadowing of Jesus' death adds to our appreciation of the mystery of the Incarnation and the depth of God's love. The sacrifice of the Son of God did not begin at Calvary — it began at the Incarnation.

The eternal Word of God, the ever-existing Son of God, through whom all things were made, and apart from whom nothing exists, who is not bound by time or place, condescended to take on human flesh and blood to save us. Though he is Lord of all, the Son of God humbled himself to be born at a certain time and in a certain place, and submitted himself to the constraints and limitations of creation.

It would not have made sense for the evangelists to proclaim Jesus' birth without at the same time helping us see its "end" and purpose — his death on the cross for our salvation. Far from spoiling our Christmas parties, the evocative images found in the Nativity passages display the magnitude of the Love born on Christmas day — Love which from the beginning gave himself in humility for our sakes.

Such a Love would make the ultimate sacrifice of the Incarnation on Calvary.

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'Physician of souls'

We still marvel at the birth of Jesus. We savor the biblical images because they bring us peace and fill us with hope at this time, and in this place. Yet they bring us peace not because he was born into a perfect world that knew no sorrow, but because he knew what he was getting into — the world, our world.

St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) once wrote, "Who could doubt the greatness of this event — that the exalted ruler of the world should come down from such a great distance to a place that was so unworthy? Why did he come down? He hurried down from the mountains to look among the hundreds of sheep for the one that had gone astray.

"How wonderful is the condescension of the God who seeks us and how great is the dignity of those who are sought by him! Lord, what is the human race, that you have made it so

great? Why are you so attached to it?

"It would have been more appropriate, surely, if we had come to him. But two things prevented us from doing that. Our eyes were clouded and he dwells in inaccessible light. And we were crippled and could not come to him. That is why he came to us — he, the physician of our souls."

As the prophet Isaiah wrote, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom a light has shone" (9:1).

The Lord Jesus comes for you. May his light shine on your family, your time and your place.

Merry Christmas!

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