

The Wonder of Bethlehem

Christmas should be a time of awe and reverence. Our salvation was made possible because God took on human flesh in a manger in Bethlehem.



The shepherds saw a babe in a manger. The wise men, arriving later, also saw a young child. But the one who emerged from Mary's womb that cold winter night in Bethlehem of Judea was much more than what was discernible with human eyes.

He was God. The sacred record is clear: "Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock 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 will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger.'

"And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!'" (Luke 2:8-14).

It is as much a marvel today as it was 2,000 years ago: God the Father so approved of the one born that night in Bethlehem that He bid the angels to worship together—even though the second person of the Trinity wore a menial garb of swaddling clothes and had been laid on a bed of hay!

A Lasting Wonder

We can only approach the high and holy subject of Christ's incarnation with awe. His name is called "Wonderful" (Is. 9:6). The angels of God are commanded to worship Him (Heb. 1:6). The one born in Bethlehem's manger is Immanuel, "God with us" (Matt. 1:23), and the "Mighty God" (Is. 9:6).

In Jesus Christ, God was born, lived here in this world, died, rose again and ascended to heaven as the God-man, becoming the object of a lasting wonder to all creation. He is entirely unique. His birth has no precedent, and His existence has no analogy. Placing Him in a category cannot explain Him, neither will an example adequately illustrate Him.

The Scriptures reveal His person, yet they never present an exhaustive definition of Him. We are told, "Without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifested in the flesh" (1 Tim. 3:16).

Moses' experience in the wilderness—when the angel appeared to him in the burning bush—is an Old Testament type of the presence of God indwelling the man, Christ Jesus. The Exodus account clearly speaks of the flame of fire being "in the midst" of the bush without consuming the bush itself (Ex. 3:2). This is seen by some as a foreshadowing of the fullness of the Godhead dwelling in Christ.

Yet the wonder of an unconsumed bush burning with fire does not ultimately compare to the mystery of Jesus, as a man, being indwelt by the fullness of God. How is it possible that this one person could be infinite and finite, mortal and immortal, omnipotent and vulnerable?

It transcends all human understanding that two wills, two natures and two memories can constitute one person who is God in the flesh. We cannot explain how both natures, in all their attributes and acts, can grow together and unite in one whole being, acting in concert in one person. Yet God declares that it is so!

Christ, in becoming man, did not cease to be God. He did not lose His position or His divine attributes. He voluntarily set them aside to take on our humanity.

Yet the humanity of Christ was not destroyed or consumed by His deity; its own human characteristics were preserved. As Luke says, "Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men" (Luke 2:52).

In the incarnation, God in Christ Jesus established a personal union between Himself and a human spirit, soul and body. Theologian A.A. Hodge declares that the union between these two natures is not mechanical, as it is between oxygen and nitrogen in our air; nor is it chemical, as it is between oxygen and hydrogen when water is formed; nor is it organic, as it is between our hearts and brains.

Rather, it is a union more intimate, more profound and more mysterious than any of these. It is personal. And, as Hodge points out, if we cannot understand the nature of the simpler unions, why should we complain because we cannot understand the nature of the most profound of all unions?

Descent Into Humanity

What necessitated the invasion of Jesus Christ—this God-man, this Son of David, Son of Man, Son of Adam and Son of God—into the realm of our human existence? Two things: the sinfulness of man and the faithfulness of our covenant-making, covenant-keeping God.

Man sinned and came under the curse of sin, which is death. He needed a Redeemer. But according to the Law, before one man could redeem another, he had to have the power, the means and the desire to do so.

No one in the human race possessed these qualities, for as the psalmist said, "None of them can by any means redeem his brother, nor give to God a ransom for him" (Ps. 49:7). Man's

sin made it necessary for a holy God to become human flesh to bear the penalty of sin and redeem humanity back into a relationship with Himself.

Thus, we have the mysterious miracle of the virgin birth. In taking on human flesh and being born of a woman, Jesus did not inherit a fallen, depraved, sinfully corrupt Adamic nature. He was born of the seed of God, not of the seed of Adam.

As theologian A.B. Bruce says: "It is not defiled humanity, but the descent of God into humanity. It is not man taking God unto himself, but God taking on manhood."

Jesus Himself gave sufficient evidence of His origin and miraculous birth. He said, "I came forth from God," and, "I came forth from the Father" (John 16:27-28). As to His deity, He knew that He was King David's Lord (Matt. 22:41-45); as to His humanity, He was David's progeny (Matt. 1:1-16).

Many times He claimed God as His Father, yet it is never recorded in Scripture that He called Joseph His father. And twice the Father audibly declared from heaven that Jesus was His "beloved Son" in whom the Father was "well pleased" (Matt. 3:17, Mark 1:11).

The Revelation of God

The progressive revelation of God that began in Eden now finds its end and highest achievement in Jesus, for He came as the ultimate revelation of God.

He is more than a way-maker; He is the Way. He is not merely a life-giver; He is the Life. He is higher than a truth-bearer; He is the Truth (John 14:6). He came to reveal the Father, for He and the Father are inseparably one (John 10:30).

Jesus came revealing a new way of seeing God. The Old Testament revealed many attributes of God by using explanatory names and divine titles.

The Father, however, was different from the way the patriarchs had been able to present Him. He was greater than the prophets had ever imagined. He was more compassionate, merciful and loving than even David portrayed in his songs.

In the person of the Lord Jesus Christ, God found a perfect vehicle of expression. Scripture says Jesus is "the express image of His person" (Heb. 1:3).

The idea conveyed here is of a die impression. It refers to something engraved or impressed: for example, a coin or seal that bears line for line all the features of the instrument making it.

All the lines of deity have been reproduced in Jesus' humanity. To see what God is like, we need only look at Jesus.

Take the lines of Christ's personality, draw them out into infinity, and you'll obtain a perfect concept of God. Rightfully, Jesus could declare, "He who has seen Me has seen the Father" (John 14:9).

Man has never been able to create a visual image of God. Every artistic attempt to portray God has taken the fashion of a man, an animal or, in some heathen lands, a demon.

Among the reasons that God became man was to give us a visual representation of Himself. As John wrote:

"That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life ... we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ" (1 John 1:1,3).

Jesus is the only apprehensible concept of God that we mortals have. Every revelation God has ever given of Himself, or will ever give of Himself, is found in the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus

is both the visible and the audible expression of God.

John also wrote, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). The Greek word used here is *logos*, which means that Jesus is the communication and expression of God.

"The Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). The invisible God can now be seen, heard and known in the person of Jesus Christ.

A Coming Day

When Jesus came into this dark world as a flesh-and-blood person, the angels proclaimed His birth. But the worship by the heavenly hosts did not end there; it continued throughout Christ's earthly ministry. And even now the saints and the hosts of heaven worship and adore Him.

Soon the day is coming when God will bring His "firstborn" (Col. 1:15), His "only begotten" (John 3:16), back to the earth. As heir of all things, He is worthy to take dominion of the world. God the Son is sovereign, ruling over His eternal kingdom in righteousness: "Your throne, O God, is forever and ever" (Heb. 1:8).

With great humility, then, let us lift our hearts in praise and worship to Him who is God, born in the flesh. This Christmas, let us acknowledge the greatest of wonders: that our salvation, our blessing, our life and our hope are made possible because God, in Christ Jesus, was born in Bethlehem.

Fuchsia Pickett, who passed away in 2004, was an ordained Methodist minister and held earned doctorates in theology and divinity. She established Fountain Gate Church in Plano, Texas, with her husband, Leroy, in 1971 and pastored the church until 1988. She wrote several books, including *The Next*

Move of God (Charisma House), and published numerous Bible studies and teachings on Scripture.