

Where You'd Least Expect Him

She wasn't wrapped in swaddling cloths in a manger; instead, she was tangled in sweat-drenched sheets in a crib. That's how Maria spent most of her days at the Guatemalan orphanage. The 7-year-old couldn't talk or turn over in her bed. She had little control over her body. Yet her smile could illuminate a room.

Maria (pictured) had been rescued from near starvation deep in the Sierra de las Minas, but the prolonged malnutrition left her so mentally and physically impaired that she now looked barely half her age and was bed-ridden in a room filled with babies and toddlers. Despite the intensive care she'd need for the rest of her life, her beaming grins came fast and easy.

From a natural perspective, there was no reason Maria or any of these kids should've been glowing with smiles. Most of them were birthed in horrific situations. A couple of the young girls had been tied to a post for two years and were merely 13 and 14 pounds when rescued. Another pair of siblings—babies only three months apart—faced severe health problems as a result of their father and grandfather being the same man. Incest, rape, abuse, drugs, divorce, murder ... these were the elements surrounding the children as they entered a dark world.

The scene wasn't so different in Bethlehem surrounding Jesus' birth. Within months of His arrival, a paranoid Herod issued a regional massacre of all boys under the age of 2. Herod had already murdered his wife, three of his sons, his brother-in-law, numerous friends and countless enemies. Clearly, the area and time in which Jesus was born was covered in great darkness.

But as Isaiah prophesied hundreds of years prior, "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living

in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned" (9:2, NIV). This light arrived in an animal's trough—not exactly the vehicle you'd expect the carpenter of the universe to lay Himself. The light almost blinded a group of social outcasts (shepherds) working the night shift—not exactly the most divine marketing plan. It penetrated not only the sky on a single starry night, but the hearts of an entire world for eternity to come.

And I'm convinced it's what illuminated Maria's smile.

It isn't just God's plan to show up in the darkest places we can imagine; it's His very nature. We typically grasp this in the context of light dispelling darkness; flip a light switch and the darkness in a room instantly leaves. After all, "God is light and in Him is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5, NKJV). Yet how often do we unknowingly view certain places as uninhabitable for Him or specific situations as "just too dark" for His presence?

We know that God is sovereign even over the world's most demonically influenced geographical regions. But do we truly grasp that God reigns over *all* evil—including our own sin—no matter how dense the darkness? Many people believe that because God is light, purity and holiness, and because sin can't coexist in His presence, therefore God can't deal with their sin.

Jesus' birth and death answered that once and for all. His arrival struck the divine match against our sin nature, and His physical departure fueled an all-engulfing blaze that can never be extinguished. As the great light of the world (John 12:42), He has overcome any depth of darkness that exists in our own sinful hearts or in a world dominated by the prince of darkness.

Therein lies just one of the infinite reasons we can behold the Christ-child with awe this Christmas—which is what this

special issue of *Charisma* is all about. We've picked the best Christmas articles from the last 36 years to help you celebrate the true spirit of Christmas. Amid the busyness of this season, I pray you'll meditate on the messages in this issue and respond in wonder and worship. And I invite you to come and adore the Jesus who shines in every dark corner of life.

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