

Advent Bible Studies 03 Dec 86 1

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[0 : 00] It might be good by way of a little background just to tell you the four things that happen. If you go into the beginning of the Gospel according to St. Matthew, you get the begats that everybody is so afraid of.

But like a scandal sheet or newspaper, if you read them very carefully, you'll find that there is some rather doubtful ancestors to Jesus in the course of history, people whose reputation in the Old Testament isn't all that it ought to be.

But I will leave you to inquire privately into that matter. The other side of it, I don't know whether you've read your newsletter yet, but I mentioned that the scriptures were, the readings that I'd suggested were full of things like blood and violence.

And somebody said how sorry they were that those things were in the scriptures. Well, I'm not the least bit sorry that those things are in the scriptures, because in the scriptures you get a very real portrait of life.

And I think we want to impose a kind of gilded portrait of what life is all about on the scriptures so that it doesn't say anything nasty or doesn't in any sense compare to the normal realities of our daily life.

[1 : 23] We want it to be kind of glossed and holy and religious looking, full of bells and stars and angels and lace and those kinds of things.

And scriptures are not like that, and I think are an antidote to that. And so I'm grateful that there are these characters like the harlot in Jericho is there.

And the other woman who, when her husband died, seduced his father in order to bear a child in that family line.

And then there is Ruth, and then there is Bathsheba, and all sorts of interesting people like that in the genealogy. So even the begats are worth looking at sometime.

Then if you go to Mark, you find that he begins really with John the Baptist, and he begins with a voice of one crying in the wilderness.

[2 : 40] And then you go to John's gospel, and you get the famous prologue, which was, In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory as of the only begotten Son of God. So that, which is really, has always been the Christmas gospel.

And so you're very familiar with that. But in Luke's gospel, you, first you have the ascription to the people to whom he's writing it, the patricians of Rome, whom he is trying to explain, in order, I'm sure, to persuade them to put their faith in Jesus Christ.

And he tells them this story, and begins with these extensive, what are known as the birth narratives, beginning with the birth of John the Baptist, and then leading on to the birth of Jesus, and then the story of the visit with Elizabeth, and the story of the naming of John the Baptist, and the story of Simeon and Anna in the temple.

And all those are part of the, and the going up to the temple, all those are part of the birth narratives, and they're very extensive. And they tend to center in Mary, and as the mother of Christ, while Matthew, his begats lead to Joseph.

[4 : 10] And it's through Joseph that Jesus is the son of David. There's a lovely story of Jesus and Mary coming to the innkeeper in Bethlehem, and being told that there was no room in the inn, and him taking down their names, and realizing that these two people are both, by birth, of royal lineage.

That is, that they are of the house of David. There is some possibility, if you look in Luke chapter 3, where there is also a list of begats. Luke, unlike Matthew, goes back to Abraham, who is the father, the one to whom the promise was made.

Luke, in an interesting way, he doesn't go back to Abraham, he goes back to Adam. And Luke puts them in the opposite order to Matthew, so that you get these two genealogies pointing to the person of Christ.

So you get these four, somebody has called it the fourfold portrait of a heavenly king, and that they begin in very different places to tell the story, and we're looking particularly today at the place where Luke begins to tell the story.

Now, I can tell you a little bit more if you look at Luke chapter 1, verse 26. In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel, and that sixth month is the sixth month of Elizabeth's confinement.

[5 : 57] The angel Gabriel is one of the two angels in Scripture that are named. The other one is Michael, and it's suggested that Gabriel is the one who took messages for God, and Michael is the one who was the warrior angel.

So, Gabriel is having delivered a message to Zechariah earlier in chapter 1. He now visits Mary in a city of Galilee named Nazareth, which is right on the top of a hill up in the north part of...

the north part of... it's disappeared. You know you can make a picture of the Holy Land very quickly by going like this, and then you put the Sea of Galilee opposite that, run the Red Sea down there, are the Jordan River down there, and the Dead Sea is there, so there you have it.

And Jerusalem is always just off the shoulder of the Dead Sea, Jericho being down here, but Jerusalem is right in there, and then you go up here, and in the hill country over here is Nazareth, and it's very much in the hill country because it's right at the top of a hill that a bus takes a long time to zigzag its way up to, and it gets way up there, and it's an interesting place.

Right now, when we were there, the difficulty is that you had to go out here and up here and over here to get to it because this is the West Bank country through here at the center of which is...

[7 : 41] they call it one name now, but we call it another. It's Samaria anyway. It's where the Samaritan woman came from, and it's right in there so that most tourists are advised to go that way or this way, but not through the center, directly up there.

And then, of course, Bethlehem is just off the shoulder of Jerusalem. So that it was up in this hill country in the Galilee, as they refer to it, up here that Nazareth was situated, up at the top of a hill in country which is, you know, I guess it's sort of typical shepherding country.

As you go up on the bus, you see this terrific cliff off to one side. It's a jagged kind of hill, and that was supposed to be the hill that they took Jesus to to throw him down to his death, but he disappeared from among them.

Well, that's the country, the city of Galilee, the city of Nazareth in Galilee. And to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, and a virgin is a young, unmarried woman of marriageable age.

Betrothal is engagement, but it's legally binding. That is, it's not just a, you know, that Gilbert and Sullivan thing, trial by jury.

[9 : 14] Isn't that about somebody breaking off an engagement? Well, this was a legally binding arrangement, that they were committed to one another but had not come together as yet.

And you deal with that more extensively next week when we talk about Joseph's view of this arrangement. Because Joseph was the one who sought to put her away privily.

That's the King James Version that he wanted to, he wanted out of this relationship until he was given a special message as to the significance of it. And so, that was, that was the relationship which existed between them.

That is, that they were betrothed to one another but were not yet married. Right. So they came to, to, to Mary, who was obviously, I mean, she was a teenager, basically.

That's how we would probably regard her. And it was the most fascinating thing to see teenage girls in Nazareth and wonder, you know, the, many of them Arabs, many, some of them Jews.

[10 : 22] and, and, it gave a kind of realistic sense to this story in a way to see these, these girls.

And, I must admit, they weren't the quiet, pious types that I thought they ought to be. They were fairly giggly, normal kind of kids that ran around the streets and, and had all sorts of in jokes that they shared with one another.

In a language that I didn't understand. But, nevertheless, there they were. And, and, you couldn't help but, you know, all your, I've told you this, I'm sure, before, but, but you're, you know how you're, our religious sense is that the whole reality of our, our religion is, is something which is, which is a little bit nicer, a little bit, where it's, all the wrinkles are out of it and everything is smooth and polite and proper.

And, and I'm sure that the New Testament doesn't teach you that. I think that's something we have imposed on the New Testament to see all these things. And I suppose it's several centuries of medieval classical painters portraying Mary and portraying these scenes for us that we have such a, such a stereotyped and unrealistic view of, of, of, of the world, of the New Testament, which I don't think is there if you read the New Testament carefully and if you read it for, for what it says because, the only thing we have in this story so far is the appearance of the angel Gabriel and, he's rather difficult to spot in our materialistic and 20th century society.

but, uh, angels are treated with, with, uh, great respect throughout the New Testament. I've met men who have met angels, uh, or claim they have.

[12 : 23] Whether they have or not, I don't know. And, uh, the possibility is that you would, if you met an angel, you, you would, meet him unaware. There was a, there was a flurry in style about 10 or 15 years ago that, uh, several people had picked up angels as hitchhikers.

And, uh, they had traveled with him a certain way and then disappeared. And, uh, but, uh, all those things are, are pretty difficult for our cold, rational, materialistic, uh, scientific way of thinking to come, to come to grips with that.

But, uh, and, and, you know, and a lot of the, a lot of the problem I think Christians are having with the Bible these days is because of the fact that, uh, they, they're, they're, they're being very analytical about these stories and, uh, trying hard to, to give historic and substantial reality to them.

So that, uh, and that, I think, is very difficult because, uh, even if you take a story like, well, you know, not too long ago I was, uh, called in to the house of a family where a bereavement had taken place the evening before and the cold, stark, hard reality of it was such that they could barely speak about it except in very terse terms.

But then, three days later when they had begun to, uh, think about it and to reflect on it and to interpret it, all sorts of interpretative elements came into it, all sorts of incidental realities around it came into it, last encounters had been interpreted, last words had had special meaning, last gestures, last books, and a whole, a whole sort of host of things had fed in to take the, the stark simplicity of that event and to surround it with the love and the care and the concern and the thoughtful and prayerful interpretations of people so that the, the starkness of the event was gone within three days.

[14 : 48] and, uh, and it was, it was hard in a sense to, to simply be analytical about it even three days later. And we're talking about a story that has been around for two thousand years and which has been interpreted and retold in hundreds and hundreds of ways and acted out in, in, uh, Sunday school dramas and in high drama and referred to by artists and in literature and in hundreds and hundreds of ways so that, uh, you know, the stark simplicity of this story that in the sixth month the angel Gabriel sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, uh, that all of that in a sense speaks to us of a kind, I mean, it is, it is very, uh, sparingly written, isn't it?

So that it's, uh, it tries not to, to create a kind of whole, uh, uh, pink fog around the story.

It, it tries to give you the reality of it so that as you read it you are, you are not being carried off into a, into a make-believe world but you're being introduced to a stark reality.

To a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph of the house of David and the virgin's name was Mary. Well, Mary is the English equivalent of the Hebrew Old Testament word Miriam or Mariam sometimes it was spelt and, uh, and this, uh, angel appears to Mary and makes this announcement to her.

The Lord is with you. And it says of Mary that she was deeply disturbed or greatly troubled at the saying and had a dialogue in her own mind uh, what sort of greeting this might be, what kind of encounter this might be.

[17 : 04] I, uh, I really feel that we are in our society and in perhaps in this century so, so robbed really of, of, uh, of much that, uh, I mean, it would be very hard for God to speak to us through an angel because we're so, we so distrust any kind of spiritual experience or ecstatic experience.

And once people become Christians and start talking about the Lord told me to do this or the Lord told me to do that or I, God directed me here or God directed me there, you know, our cold secular mind says this guy is spooked, you know, that he thinks this is happening to him.

But, uh, the New Testament and the Old Testament alike seem to, without apology, bring God in on everything.

Uh, there was a cartoon that came into the office this morning which said something like, uh, I'd like to ask God why all this war and poverty and suffering and affliction and sorrow.

And his friend says to him, well, why don't you? And he says, because he might ask me the same question. Uh, that, uh, that, I mean, we can do it in a cartoon, but, but the spiritual reality of our world is one that I think we very much need to be in touch with.

[18 : 54] I, I often have the, uh, have the sense when we're having a meeting sometimes and when the business agenda is fairly heavy that we have to go through to say, uh, to that group of people, let us pray.

Or maybe you experience the same thing around your table when you say, let's say grace. You feel like you're asking people to board, uh, a UFO and take off to some planet out in, in space that, you know, that it's so unrealistic.

And yet, I'm sure that what the scriptures do for you and what Mary experiences here comes closer to describing, comes as close to describing the reality of a personal and spiritual relationship to God as anything that happens in our lives.

that this is a description of something that we all could be, perhaps are, and certainly should be, uh, experiencing in our daily lives.

That we have that relationship to God's presence with us. And, uh, that God, and that we are open to God speaking to us even in this very direct and personal way.

[20 : 19] And so, God speaks to Mary, or the angel Gabriel speaks to Mary and says, Hail, O favored one, that is, one on whom grace, to whom grace has been shown or grace has been showered.

The Lord is with you. And, uh, that's, that's called the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

She was greatly troubled at the saying, considered in her mind what sort of greeting this must be. And the angel said, Do not be afraid.

And that's the, uh, that's the fear which runs away from God rather than the fear which opens us up to God. For you have found favor with God.

And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son and you shall call his name Jesus. And, uh, so it was announced to, to Mary that, uh, that this would happen.

[21 : 25] And you end up as the result of this with, uh, the story going on to, uh, to say, to, to conclude the, uh, Gabriel's message, he will be great, will be called the son of the most high, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David.

See how that sort of political reality is, is woven into the spiritual reality of who Christ is as a king. And he will reign over the house of Jacob forever.

And of his kingdom there will be no end. That was the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham and then the promise to, to David. And Mary quite rightly and quite naturally says, how shall this be since I have no husband?

And the angel said to her, the Holy Spirit will come upon you. The power of the most high will overshadow you. Therefore, the child to be born will be called holy, the son of God.

And our friend Dr. Lionel Gurney says that this is very difficult for the Muslims to come to grips with this because they interpret it in terms of God marrying Mary and having a child by her.

[22 : 51] After the manner in the sense of the stories of the ancient gods coming among the daughters of men. and that this reality was the basis of what the Roman Catholic Church names the Immaculate Conception.

But it was when they talk about the Immaculate Conception, they're talking about the Immaculate Conception of Mary whom it is thought was born in the same way according to their tradition.

But this pregnancy begins in the way that is described here that the Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.

And the child that is born will be called Holy the Son of God. And behold, your kinswoman Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren.

And you know, as I know, that the virgin birth of Christ has always been a kind of naughty issue and that's K-N-O-T-T-Y. And the difficulty being that it's biologically quite impossible that a virgin birth should happen and that it's but the church has maintained this to be true and has maintained that not that this is true in and of itself but that this is truly what the scripture teaches.

[24 : 56] You know, that and there's been some question because of the reference which is made to the passage in Isaiah where behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son and his name shall be called Immanuel.

And somebody discovered that the word that was interpreted virgin there was in fact a young woman will conceive and bear a son and it referred historically to the birth of a king who was to be a deliverer to his people but then it was interpreted prophetically not to be just that historical event but the event it was used to as the demonstration of the prophecy of this event which is spoken of in Luke where and that happens all the time in scripture that there is the kingdom of David but the kingdom of David represents in history the reality of an eternal kingdom there is the fatherhood of Abraham who is by blood the father of the

Israelites and the Jews but there is the greater reality which is the fatherhood of God which is spiritually understood and so in history there is always the in a sense the local event but then there is the kind of transcendent and eternal event which relates to it and that's what's spoken of here and this is how it was interpreted by scholars for a very long time and then as you know in our highly pragmatic 20th century we have seen the utter impossibility of a virgin birth and have gone back to read the scriptures again and to say well perhaps they don't say there was a virgin birth and naturally enough the scholars disagree on this and argue both sides of it but the conclusion is and even the statement of the bishops of the

Church of England that they have just put out with respect to that bishop that raised all the problems the one up at the little country on the little city on the east coast Durham that in fact the scriptures do teach that Jesus was born of a woman who was a virgin and that the Holy Spirit came upon her the power of the Most High overshadowed her and the child to be born was in a unique way the Son of God well that's the event the central event which means that with Luke's gospel and with this event you have the beginning of the life of Jesus

Christ and in this beginning of the life of Jesus Christ you have a pregnant unmarried girl