

The Birth of Jesus

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[0 : 00] So, shall we now come to study God's Word? We read what are called the birth narratives of Jesus.

These are the record of Jesus coming into the world. These readings from Matthew and Luke are ones which I think we've all loved from childhood.

Perhaps not always for the most pure motives, because I think all of us quite like the presents that we get, which are associated with these readings. What I want to do today is focus on three things from our readings.

We're going to focus on the angels. We're going to focus on the three gifts, gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And we're going to focus on the term the Christ, all things that appeared in our readings.

The plan is to examine each of these. And hopefully by the time we finish, we'll also find something of application for us, even now, 2,000 years on, from these events that are recorded.

[1 : 25] Because remember, this is living Word, and it applies to us as living beings, a gift from the living God, his self-revelation to us. Now, before we begin, we need to have some understanding of two things.

Two things about the Scriptures. This wonderful collection of books, which we call the Bible, our church is part of a tradition, the deformed tradition, that sees the whole thing as a continuity. Although we have an Old Testament and a New Testament, there is no artificial division between the Old Testament and the New. They have a continuous unity.

In fact, if we look at the word testament, we sometimes misunderstand it. When we hear the word testament, we often think in terms of testimony, like a witness would give, or a last will and testament that someone would write to be enacted after their death.

But that's not the way the word is used in the Bible. When we come across the word testament, due to the way this word has been translated through Greek and Latin, it actually means covenant.

[2 : 56] So the New Testament, if we were translating this now for the first time, we would call the New Testament the New Covenant, reflecting Jesus' words at the Last Supper when he said, this is the New Covenant in my blood.

Also, the Old Testament, therefore, means, in simple English, would mean the Old Covenant. But there's a better way to describe it.

If you think about the Old Testament, there are several covenants there. There's a covenant with Adam, a covenant with Noah, a covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

So there are several covenants. So the way to think about the Old Testament, if we were translating it now from the original Hebrew, we would call it the former covenants, plural, the former covenants, and we would call the New Testament the New Covenant, or the latest covenant, or probably, more accurately, the final covenant.

Now, what do we mean by covenant? In everyday English, a covenant would mean a contract between two parties, or as the Americans would say, a deal.

[4 : 16] So what we can see here, in terms of the New Testament as the New Covenant, here, recorded for us, is God's contract with us as mankind, as men and women, boys and girls.

The politicians have stolen the term New Deal. But it correctly belongs to the Scriptures. This is God's New Deal with man.

So remember this. The background we need to understand is that there is a continuous unity as you see the covenants unfold. Now, this makes things interesting, because it means that we can pick up themes that run right through Scripture, from the beginning, from Genesis, right through to the end in Revelation.

We can pick up themes. It also means when we read the New Testament, these are pointing to clues that are already there in the Old Testament.

Does that make sense? We pick up themes, clues, in the New Testament, which have already been hinted at very strongly in the Old.

[5 : 39] So that's the first thing to understand. This book has a continuous unity. And that shouldn't surprise us, because our Lord wrote it from beginning to end.

The second background thing we need to understand is the main theme of all Scripture. There is one theme that runs right through Scripture, which is more important than anything else.

And it's this. That theme is the living God's plan to rescue mankind from mankind's sin and to restore a close, right relationship with himself.

Now, theologians call this theme redemptive history. But let's put it into everyday English. This means God's rescue mission.

The mission that he's taken upon himself to rescue us. So the main theme of all Scripture is the living God's plan to rescue mankind from mankind's sin and to restore a close, right relationship with himself.

[6 : 53] Now, that can be detected even from Genesis chapter 3. And that theme runs right through Scripture.

And it has its culmination in the cross. So hang on to those thoughts of background. Because as we turn to our readings, with the birth of Jesus, God's rescue mission moves into its most critical phase.

And let's study these things I mentioned. With Jesus coming to the world, we're going to look at the angels, the gifts, and this remarkable term, the Christ.

And remember, the Old Testament holds the clues to the meaning of each of these things. Let's look at angels first.

They're heavenly beings, divine messengers. They're found in the Old Testament and the New Testament. And the usual effect we find in Scripture when men and women meet angels is one of terror and awe.

[8 : 06] It happens every time. Now, this is what happened with the shepherds in our reading in Luke. They were absolutely terrified.

And notice, what the angel had to say first was, fear not. He had to put them at their ease. Now, the clues as to what's going on here, again, are in the Old Testament.

Notice what appeared with the angel. We often miss it because we read it too quickly. It says in verse 9 of Luke 2, And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear.

Let your mind just drift a moment to the glory of the Lord. It says it shone around the shepherds. Our Bibles in the New Testament are in Greek.

The Old Testament is almost all in Hebrew. But this glory of the Lord is something we've actually met before. If I put it into the Hebrew, if this was written in Hebrew, what it would say is, and the Shekinah shone around them.

[9 : 26] The Shekinah being God's manifest presence, which was a glistening golden cloud. Now, there are two places in the Old Testament we find that.

The first is in Exodus 40, when the tabernacle was completed, and God himself came to inhabit the Holy of Holies. This glistening golden cloud was seen.

The second time is in 1 Kings 8, when Solomon's temple was dedicated. Again, the Shekinah appeared, God's manifest presence.

And here we have a third record of it, with the coming of Jesus into the world. Coming into the world, the Shekinah comes again.

We miss that when we read this too quickly. But this is the glory of the Lord. It's not new. This has appeared before in the experience of God's people.

[10 : 27] So what can we then say? As the angel spoke, and the Shekinah shone around, God's presence was in the message of Jesus' birth.

Shall we look though more at the angels? We're told here, that a multitude of the heavenly host appeared. That means thousands upon thousands of angels.

In this, the living God is displaying his power. His awesome, majestic power. Again, there is something we know from the Old Testament, if we stop and think, that actually resonates with this.

Here in the sky are thousands and thousands of angels. And this is actually, it points to one of God's names.

The Lord of hosts. The Lord of hosts. Hosts, in the term the Lord of hosts, applies to the angels of the armies of heaven.

[11:34] And here he is, with Jesus coming into the world, the second person of the Godhead. God puts on, God the Father puts on, the most remarkable display of his power, his majestic power.

Older translations, like the AV, translated literally as Lord of hosts. I did a quick count with the computer. Lord of hosts, in the authorised version, is mentioned 235 times.

More modern translations, instead of translating it literally, translated in terms of the power on display, the majestic power, and translated as Lord Almighty.

Interestingly, our ESV version that we use, reverts to the older way of translating it, of Lord of hosts. So, the angels appear.

And they show God's majestic name. And the glistening cloud shows God's majestic presence.

Now, what shall we say about angels in the New Testament?

[12:50] If you think about it, angels announced Jesus' birth. We have the record here. But they also announced his resurrection. Think of that resurrection, morning.

Who spoke to the women? Angels. Angels were a support to Jesus through his ministry. We know that after his temptation in the wilderness, and also in Gethsemane, when at prayer, an angel came to strengthen him.

But note this. When it came to his betrayal, his trials, and his crucifixion, he faced those alone, with no assistance from angels.

He faced those alone. God's rescue mission required that. But here's an intriguing thought.

Remember the night that Jesus was arrested.

Remember there was a scuffle in Gethsemane as the temple guards and the thugs and the Pharisees came to arrest Jesus. There was a scuffle.

[14:03] A sword flashed. Peter tried to hit someone, cut off his ear by accident. And Jesus said, Enough. And Jesus then makes an interesting comment. And remember, this was said at night.

He said that he, in that moment, could appeal to his father. And his father would, at once, send him 12 legions of angels. That's 72,000 angels.

That means Jesus knew the armies of heaven were on permanent standby for him. Permanent standby. And here's the intriguing thought.

Imagine if he had called on those angels. You know, when we read in Luke about a multitude appearing, it says suddenly. What the Greek says is much more vivid.

It says, In a flash. The closest any of us can ever come to that is something that some of you might have seen. If you're out on a dark night and it's been snowing, and the snow's fallen, and then there's a lightning strike.

[15:06] You know the way that you're blinded for a few seconds by the intense whiteness. That's what it was like for the shepherds when the angels appeared.

Could you imagine what it would have been like for the thugs that evening arresting Jesus if the armies of heaven had appeared as Jesus could have asked. It was possible, but to save his people on the cross, it was not an option he could take.

Now that's the end of our study on angels. Remember though what the angels show. Remember the term Lord of hosts. We sang it in our psalm, Psalm 84.

Lord of hosts. And we've learned something of God's presence and also of God's power declaring the coming of Jesus.

Let's move on now and study the gifts. Mysterious visitors from the east called wise men brought gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

[16:16] Now there are many ways to study the gifts. many ways. There are whole sermons on how to study the gifts. But today, I'm going to suggest we look at it in a very simple way.

Our approach has to be that we look at all three gifts together. So gold, frankincense, and myrrh. If we do a search in the scriptures and we ask the question, where are these three gifts found together?

We could use a computer or a concordance. You'll find something interesting. Gold, frankincense, and myrrh occur in only two chapters in scripture.

The first is in our reading in Matthew. That's our New Testament one. The other is in the Old Testament. And that's in Exodus chapter 30. I give you this challenge. Before you go to bed tonight, read Exodus chapter 30. That's 3-0. And try and find gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And I promise you this, you'll find all three. [17:24] Now, what is Exodus chapter 30 about? I'll briefly summarize it. It's about the tabernacle. It's about the tabernacle.

And what we find is that gold, frankincense, and myrrh were all used there in different ways. Now, remember, the tabernacle was God's personal tent in the midst of his people as they wandered through the desert.

After their miraculous escape and redemption from Egypt, the tabernacle was the place where God dwelt among his people. And interestingly, the word tabernacle in Hebrew, if you translate it directly into English, is dwelling place.

Which again, we sang in our psalm, Psalm 84. How lovely is thy dwelling place. Dwelling place there is his tabernacle. Our translators, all those years ago, translated it literally.

Now, what shall we say about the tabernacle? Most of us have seen pictures of what it might have looked like.

[18:37] There was an outer courtyard and in the midst was a tent. Inside the tent were two rooms. You entered the first bigger room called the holy place and that's where the priest could go.

But once a year, the high priest was allowed to go with blood beyond the curtain into the next room which was called the holy of holies or as some translations have it, the most holy place.

Now, that day he was allowed to go there was called the day of atonement. Now, it might interest you to know that last Thursday in the Jewish calendar was the day of atonement.

The Jews unfortunately cannot observe it as the scriptures tell them to but they still record it with a fast every year and that was last Thursday.

So, what about the tabernacle? The Jewish people knew, God's people knew that God dwelt within the holy of holies.

[19:47] This was his throne room on earth. He dwelt in heaven but when he was on earth he dwelt within the holy of holies. So, the function and the purpose of the tabernacle very simply was to be God's dwelling place just as we sang in Psalm 84.

But it was more than that. It was God dwelling visibly among his people and it was also the place on the day of atonement but also with other sacrifices through the year where human sin was atoned for by sacrifice.

Atonement by sacrifice. And on that one day of the year which would have been last Thursday the high priest was allowed access to the very presence of the living God.

God's word Now by Jesus' time the tabernacle had been replaced. It was now a more permanent structure and from the time of Solomon there had been a temple standing in Jerusalem which took over all of the functions of the tabernacle.

In fact its layout was very similar. There was an outer courtyard there was a central building and in that were two rooms. A holy place and deep inside another room the Holy of Holies and again the place where God dwelt.

[21:21] And at the time of our readings that temple was still a living reality to God's people and in fact would still be for another 70 years.

Now what I want you to do is imagine something. Imagine you lived in Bethlehem at the time of Jesus' birth. Imagine you are one of God's devout people.

You know your scriptures. What I want you to do is think of the gifts. I want you to climb a hill above Bethlehem and sit down.

Sit and ponder. There's been so much that has happened in this last few weeks. You've heard from the shepherds. They saw one angel surrounded by the Shekinah.

They were then there were thousands and upon thousands of angels lighting up the night sky. You hear that the angel reported that a child had been born who was a saviour for the people and was Christ.

[22:40] And you're sitting there pondering things. And you're thinking over these gifts gold, frankincense and myrrh. I remember at that time you did not have the New Testament to guide you.

Your scriptures were the former covenants, the Old Testament. you're sitting there. Now if you sit above Bethlehem, Jerusalem is only five miles away.

And actually when you look you can see Jerusalem. So on the one hand you can see Jerusalem and on the other hand you can see Bethlehem. you could also see the temple very clearly. The temple at this time had been renovated by of all people Herod, King Herod had paid the equivalent of millions of pounds to renovate the temple. And it stood at this time fifteen stories high. And the Jewish Talmud records that it was the most beautiful building in the world at that time. It used to glisten in the sunshine. Now if you think about it five miles is the distance you would have from back looking across to Stornoway.

[23 : 55] So imagine you're at back and you look to Stornoway you can see the war memorial above Stornoway. Now imagine that's the distance from Bethlehem to Jerusalem.

The temple is fifteen stories high. Higher than the war memorial. So you're sitting there. And what I want you to do is in your mind make this contrast.

Look at the temple then look at Jesus. So look at the temple and then look at Jesus. So you're a devout believing person you're utterly bamboozled and confused by all that's been happening and you're thinking over these gifts.

Now watch what happens. As you look at the temple you say to yourself there's gold frankincense and myrrh there and that's where the living God dwells.

And then you look at Bethlehem and think of this young child you've heard about. There's gold frankincense and myrrh there could it really be that that's where the living God dwells?

[25 : 03] Then you think on. Look at the temple again. There's gold frankincense and myrrh there and that's where the living God dwells obviously visibly among his people.

Then you look at Bethlehem and think of Jesus a young child. Could it really be that this is the living God dwelling among his people?

Now those of you who know your scriptures John 1 the word became flesh and dwelt among us and we beheld his glory. It's the third thing to think though.

You're sitting on that hilltop. You can see Jerusalem. You can see the temple and you think there's gold frankincense and myrrh being used inside the temple and that is the place where human sin is atoned for by sacrifice to allow access to the presence of the living God.

And then you look at Bethlehem and you think of Jesus there this young child and you think could it really be that in this child in the fullness of time that human sin will be atoned for by sacrifice to allow access to the presence of the living God.

[26 : 26] God. Now if you were that Jewish person and you lived another 30 years you would witness the cross and remember the cross.

That is the place where the living God in Jesus Christ atoned for human sin by sacrifice to allow access to his very presence.

And remember the moment he died and the price was paid the temple curtain into the Holy of Holies was torn in two. So the Old Testament the former covenants hold the clues to the meaning of the gifts.

But it's important to take the three gifts together. Now there's an interesting sermon on how each of the gifts was used within the tabernacle but there's not time for that just now.

We need to move on quickly. That's the end of our study of the gifts. Let's move on to this term the Christ. The angels were very careful to use this term the Christ.

[27 : 37] They said a saviour to the shepherds a saviour which is Christ the Lord has been born. Now we know that Jesus name was given by an angel to Joseph as Jesus.

So what of Christ? What we need to understand is that Christ is not a name. It's a title. It's not a name.

It's a title. The trouble is when we say Jesus Christ we often think of the name Christ as a surname. Now it's only for the last thousand years in this part of the world we've been using surnames. This term Christ is better stated as the Christ.

That's the term in Greek. If you said it in Hebrew you would say the Messiah. And often you will not say Messiah you will say the Messiah. So it's important to add the definite article.

[28 : 45] And if we think of modern times think of other titles that we use with respect. There's Her Majesty the Queen. Or if you know a lord of the realm you would say the Lord Mackay of Clashfern.

Or even people we know very well as our ministers are correctly titled the Reverend Ivor Martin or the Reverend Kenneth I MacLeod.

These are titles. So remember the term Christ as a title not a name. In fact St. Paul that's one reason why St.

Paul often turns the name round and says Christ Jesus rather than Jesus Christ. But we need to know what is the meaning of this title.

The Christ the Messiah. Many of you will know it means the anointed one. Now remember the clues for the anointed one as we found before are all in the former covenants.

[29 : 52] Everything is there for us if we will look. The first place to start is actually with the gifts. One of the gifts, myrrh, when you read Exodus 30 was used for anointing oil.

Now the anointing oil was used for the tabernacle and then later the temple. It was used for all the furnishings of the tabernacle and the temple and it was also used for the priests.

So the point here about anointing, it meant a setting apart for a special duty, a special function. So we know the priests were anointed, but that's not the only group of people who were anointed in the Old Testament.

If we think of familiar scenes, remember when Samuel was sent to Bethlehem to the house of Jesse and he was told to anoint the future king David.

Remember another familiar scene as Elijah's duty as prophet was coming to an end. He anointed his successor Elisha.

[31 : 10] Now we have to be careful, the oil that was used was maybe not the same oil as the tabernacle because the tabernacle oil was only for the tabernacle and the priests. Probably other oil was used but the concepts are anointing set apart for a special purpose.

So in the Old Testament we find three groups of people who were anointed. The priest, the king and the prophet in that order that we discover them. Now in the Bible all three of these offices, duties, come together in the term the Christ, the anointed one.

And so when Jesus' birth is announced all three of these offices come together and if we put them into a New Testament order that we're more familiar with instead of priest, king, prophet, the angels were announcing the prophet, the priest and the king had been born.

Christ means all three. Now that's the end of our study of the Christ and we're moving in to our conclusion now and this will be brief.

How do we apply this to ourselves now? We need to go right back to the beginning of the sermon and understand the main theme of all scripture what theologians call redemptive history but in everyday English let's call it God's rescue mission.

[32 : 41] The initiatives with God and he is going to rescue us. The initiatives with God and he is out to rescue us. The thing is human sin had to be dealt with to allow the relationship to be restored between God and mankind to the one that Adam had before he fell when he was able to walk with God in the garden in the cool of the day.

Now the clues to the purpose of Jesus' earthly ministry even at his birth are all there in the Old Testament. To sum it up the Lord of hosts sent angels to announce the birth of the Christ.

He points us to Jesus' ministry and purpose in the gifts. And here's something I want you to do.

Over the next few months you will be bombarded with suggestions of presents. Gifts. Because if there's one thing the world has taken out of these narratives it is the giving of gifts.

gifts. But what I want you to do is stop and think for a moment. The gifts are the things that hold the key to understanding the coming of Christ into the world.

[34 : 09] And I can't put it any more eloquently than this. Remember the gifts and just stop and think whenever you are thinking about presents. The gifts tell us in Jesus this is where the living God dwells.

The gifts tell us that this is where the living God dwells among his people. And the gifts tell us that in Jesus this is where human sin was atoned for by sacrifice to allow access to the presence of the living God.

Here then is the offer that's made to us now from the living God. In Jesus he has opened the way for each of us into his very presence.

All we have to do is accept responsibility for our sins, repent for them, accept Jesus taking the punishment for them on the cross, and then let the living God flood into our lives as he restores that right relationship that Adam once had.

That's the end of our sermon. Shall we stand to pray? Sovereign Lord, we thank you that we have been in this place this night.

[35 : 45] We thank you for the things that we have sung, that we have thought, that we have read, that we have pondered. Please give us something of yourself as we go from this place, something new to think about, something to inspire, and take us, Lord, through this coming week.

Help us to walk humbly with you, Lord. Please be with us in our final singing, and as we go from this place, we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.