

CHAPTER 1

The Joy of Christmas



*Do not be afraid, for behold,
I bring you good tidings of great joy.*

Luke 2:10

Thousands of years before He was born, the coming of Jesus of Nazareth was foretold. When He finally came, He fulfilled hundreds of prophecies.

Even secular writers who have dared to look at the life of Jesus and some of the prophecies about Him—His birth, His life, His death—have conceded that it is an “unsolved mystery.” To the believer, this “unsolved mystery” points to the miraculous intervention of God, who knows the end and the beginning and who pointed the way for His Messiah. Again, Christ is not Jesus’ last name; it is His title. He is *the* Messiah, the Anointed One, the only mediator between God and man. The purpose of this book is to show that the life of Jesus was miraculously foretold. The more details we learn about Jesus, the more clearly we see that He is God’s Messiah.

When Jesus came to Earth the first time, He was not recognized for who He really was. One of the most amazing facts of all is that the ones who rejected Him actually *fulfilled prophecy* in the process of rejecting Him. Their hatred of Jesus consumed and blinded them to the irony of what they were doing. Thus, they became unwitting

players in a drama foretold hundreds of years before. Rabbi Moshe Laurie, a Messianic rabbi from Connecticut, remarks:

[M]ost people that ask me, “Well, why was the Messiah denied?” Because, you see, if He [were] not denied, He would’ve not fulfilled His prophecy. And He would not be the Messiah.³

The apostle Paul actually made a very similar remark in a synagogue. He said of Jesus and His mistreatment by the temple authorities: “For those who dwell in Jerusalem, and their rulers, because they did not know Him, nor even the voices of the Prophets which are read every Sabbath, have fulfilled them [the prophecies] in condemning Him” (Acts 13:27).

But long before Good Friday, there was Christmas.

THE MAJESTY OF CHRISTMAS

Christmas weaves its own magic spell, with twinkling lights and silver bells transforming the landscape into a winter wonderland. Christmas waves its magic wand and, behold, everything is lovelier and softer and more beautiful than before. Christmas works its annual enchantment and carols float on the air and sing in the heart. “Bah, humbug!” is changed into “Merry Christmas.” There is a surge of love and kindness not felt at any other time of the year.

Christmas is the most wonderful time of the year. A starlit night, a crude shelter, a lantern swinging from a beam, cattle chewing their cud, shepherds standing at the door, a travel-weary young woman, a simple village carpenter, the song of angels, and a babe lying in a manger. These are the simple parts of that artless and lovely story for which children never lose their delight and age never loses its affection.

What a difference that day has made! The story of the birth brings the prodigal home; it softens the blows of adversity; it takes the sting out of defeat; it puts a song in the heart; it gives new mean-

ing and purpose to life. Yes, Christmas is the most wonderful time of the year.

IT WAS ALL FORETOLD

Long before the first Christmas, the ancient Hebrew prophets foretold it. They told about One coming who would be born in Bethlehem. He would be of the line of David (and thus, of Abraham’s, Isaac’s, Jacob’s, and Judah’s line). He would be worshiped by foreign rulers who would come from the East. He would be a Son who was born as a human, and yet He would be God.

As we will see later, the Old Testament foretold:

- Who His ancestors would be, including Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Judah, Jesse, and David;
- That He would be born of a virgin;
- That His name would be called Immanuel (meaning God with us);
- That He would be born in Bethlehem (a small village); and
- That He would live for a while in Egypt.

Christmas is an annual source of joy, and to think it was foretold long before it took place adds an extra element of wonder. This book will explore numerous details of the life of Jesus Christ, revealing that the Hebrew prophet, Isaiah, could just as well be called a Gospel writer. In fact, Part III of this book is called “The Gospel According to Isaiah.”

HIS BIRTH

After His ancient lineage, we look at His birth. The very first of the biblical prophecies is that He would be born of the seed of a woman. Throughout all Scripture no one else but the Messiah is ever called the “seed of a woman.” The reference is always to the seed of a man. In general, women are not even mentioned in biblical genealogies.⁴ But here is a virgin who is going to conceive, and here is the One who is to be the seed only of a woman—a difficult thing

to arrange, especially before one is conceived.

How could someone prearrange his own birth? He would have to be born in Bethlehem, and He would have to make sure, also, that His goings forth have been from of old, even from everlasting which, of course, reminds us of the fact that He is God, and could therefore arrange all such things, because the prophet Isaiah said, almost 750 years before He was born:

For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6).

And so it was that this One who came forth in the tiny town of Bethlehem, on the particular day prophesied by Daniel, had been going on forever.

THE PERSISTENCE OF CHRISTMAS

Perhaps, the most amazing thing about Christmas is its persistence. Age cannot affect it; time does not efface it; the centuries have not dimmed its glory. At each recurring yuletide, our reverence for it increases, and our fascination with it intensifies.

In the darkest hours of life, men have found in it their peace. In deepest desperation, men have found in it their consolation. In death's cold embrace, they have found in it their hope. Just when you think the world is through with it, it meets you coming around the corner. Somehow, in the midst of all the rough and tumble of history, it has elbowed its way down to the present. The swirl of hatred cannot bury it. The oceans of misunderstanding cannot drown it. The avalanche of distortion cannot hide it, and all the armies of the world have been unable to destroy it. Christmas abides, and it brings with it the most joyful time of the year.

The keynote of the Christmas story is joy—"We bring you glad



The Nativity of Christ

tidings of great joy." There has been a tragic tendency in the past on the part of many toward "drone religion," "whine religion," "cant religion," "moan religion," "croak religion," or "sepulcher religion." We ought to celebrate religion. Christianity should be exultation, jubilation, exhilaration. Christmas is a triumph and a time for singing. Our worship resounds with hymnody. It sparkles with anthems. It overflows with thanksgiving and praise. It is a time of joy—as the carol proclaims, "Joy to the world, the Lord is come." Arguably the best music in the world belongs to Christmas, such as the rich Christmas carols or Handel's *Messiah* (although originally it was viewed as an Easter oratorio).

In reading Luke 2:10 in the Greek text, it struck me how powerful that phrase is. "*Ephobethason phobon megan*," which means: "They feared a great fear." They were overwhelmed with terror. I

wonder what the effect would be upon some of our modern sophisticated secularists today if, suddenly and unexpectedly, the Divine were to break in upon the human, the eternal were to burst in upon the temporal, and the heavenly were suddenly to be opened up to the earthly. I think that in many cases these sophisticates would find that their false teeth would fall right to the ground and their knees would begin to knock like castanets. Their worst fears would come upon them and they would discover that, alas, there is a God. It is only unbelief that paints God in gloomy colors.

God is the God of all joy, and His first word to us was, "Fear not. Be of good cheer." Even though Scripture says the time will come when men's hearts will fail them for fear, the admonitions repeatedly come: "Be not afraid. Fear not. Let not your hearts be troubled. Be anxious for nothing." For the sovereign and gracious God has come into the midst of all our anxieties and fears and has said that "all will be well." Someone once said that the phrase or idea of "fear not" appears 365 times in Scripture. I have never counted to verify that, but it is a pleasant thought. Let the corners of lips turn up, for Christ is born in Bethlehem as the ancient prophet Micah predicted and joy has come to the world.

The great Charles Spurgeon said that it is not just joy we are to have, but great joy, good tidings of great joy. He said:

Man is like a harp, unstrung, and the music of his soul's living strings is discordant, his whole nature wails with sorrow; but the Son of David, that mighty harpist, has come to restore the harmony of humanity, and where His gracious fingers move among the strings, the touch of the fingers of an incarnate God brings forth music as sweet as that of the spheres, and melody as rich as a seraph's canticle.

Though earth's joys often are few, Heaven has poured out an

ocean of joy on the parched souls of men.

GREAT JOY

Good tidings of great joy. That is what the Christian religion is all about. "For unto you is born this day in the City of David a Savior." He is born. We are not merely talking about an idea, a philosophy, a theological dictum or doctrine or dogma. We are talking about a fact, an historic event, a concrete happening. It was predicted. It came to be. Jesus Christ was born in Bethlehem. He lived and He suffered under Pontius Pilate, and with those words, the life of Jesus Christ is pounded into the bedrock of history. He died and rose again the third day.

Unlike all other religions, which are nothing more than religio-philosophies, Christianity is based upon facts and upon evidence, evidence which is absolutely incontrovertible. In spite of all criticism, in spite of all charges of infidelity, those facts remain as untouched and undisturbed as when they first occurred in this world. Christ was born "this day" said the angel. "This day" in history; "this day" exactly as predicted by the prophet Daniel in the very year that He was to come. (For more detail, please see Chapter 17.)

He came, we are told, "in the fullness of time." Just at the time when the world was most desperately in need of a Savior, He came. When the golden age of Greek philosophy was past and an intellectual barrenness covered the landscape of the mind, when faith in the Homeric gods had all but vanished completely and skepticism pallid the souls of men, when the moral structures of society had collapsed everywhere and man had sunk deep into the mire of depravity and vice, then. Then. Then Jesus Christ came into the world. In the fullness of time. Exactly at the moment He was most needed.

Philip Schaff, the great nineteenth-century historian, says that the history of mankind before that day must be viewed as a preparation for His coming and that all of the history after His birth is the diffusion of His spirit and the progress of His kingdom in this world. Jesus Christ split the ages in half, as with a divine scimitar.

Such is the power of that single life, born into the world on that glorious day.

This life not only confounded all the sophistry of the scribes and Pharisees and silenced the subtleties of the Sadducees; it not only demonstrated the futility and the fallacy of Greek philosophy, but also caused the very throne of Caesar to tremble. At last, it finally brought the entire structure of pagan heathenism crashing down into the dust. All this was accomplished by that babe born in Bethlehem.

He grew to manhood and with one hand smote the legalism of Israel. With the other He dealt a death blow to the superstitious ignorance of Gentile paganism. He has continued to trod across the centuries conquering—and is still to conquer. He lifts the ages out of their streams and, taking the gates of death, He rises to the hill of Calvary and casts them into oblivion. There has never been anyone remotely comparable to Jesus of Nazareth, the babe born in Bethlehem. He is the mighty Savior and God.

Yet it seems that in spite of the centuries which have passed and the repetition of the message, there are still many who do not seem to get the point. I think of the story Paul Harvey told some years ago on one of his radio broadcasts. It was about a rather disreputable looking man who appeared at the front door of a beautiful home and asked the lady of the house if there was not some work he could do around the place to earn enough money for a meal. She said to him, "Well, the porch out back could stand painting. There's a can of green paint in the garage." A couple of hours later he reappeared at the door, besprinkled with green paint, and announced that the job was completed. "But, lady," he said, "that's not a Porsche out there, that's a Ferrari." Some people just never get the point.

I talk to people who think they have accepted Jesus Christ as Savior, and all they have done is accept Him as a teacher. Others who think they have accepted Him as Savior have simply accepted Him as their example. Still others have accepted Him as a guide or helper, but Jesus came to do much more than that. He came to be

the Savior of the world. He came to save our souls. Nothing less than that will suffice.

THE PURPOSE OF THE SHEEP

Jesus was born in Bethlehem, and it was over the sloping hills outside of Bethlehem that the shepherds were watching their flocks by night. I have visited the site and meditated upon the events of this night, as have many of you.

Do you know why those sheep were being raised? They were being fattened for transport to Jerusalem to be slaughtered on the altars of the temple. It was here amidst those shepherds and their sheep that the announcement came that the Lamb of God was born. The Lamb of God, "who takes away the sin of the world." There would be no more need for lamb or oxen to die. It was the last, the final evening sacrifice. It was our guilt that was to be laid upon Him. He was to have imputed unto Him the sin of the world and there, upon the altar of Calvary, the Lamb of God was to be slain that we might know eternal life. All the Old Testament prescriptions about the sacrifices point to the once and for all sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross.

Dr. Donald Grey Barnhouse was my spiritual father. Someone once gave me a Christmas card that he sent out in 1956, the very year I set out for seminary. The Christmas card contained within it this beautiful poem:

Not all the blood of beasts on Jewish altars lain
 Could give the guilty conscience peace or wash
 away the stain.
 But Christ, the Heavenly Lamb, takes all our sins
 away
 The sacrifice of nobler name and richer blood than
 they.
 On Christmas Day, God's Lamb was born that He
 might die.

At crucifixion time He died that we might live on high.
 Thus, life and death in Him were joined in mystery.
 His life brought death, His death brought life to us eternally.⁵

The river of life splits at last into two different streams that flow in diametrically opposite directions. There are two eternities, the one as swift, as long, and as mighty as the other. One empties into an ocean of gladness, opaline above and coralline beneath, and the other plunges over a cataract of despair, into an abyss of hopelessness. Upon the one there sail argosies of light; upon the other are found the hulks of the wrecks of lives dismantled by the fiery cyclone of divine wrath.

CONCLUSION

“Joy to the world, The Lord is come.” What a glorious thought that is—and joy is precisely what Christmas brings. In fact, one national survey showed that 90 percent of people in America say they are happier at Christmastime than at any other time of the year. The very idea of Christmas paired with sorrow is almost oxymoronic; the two just do not go together. Christmas and joy go hand in hand, and joy was born on Christmas morning. And to think, hundreds of years before the first Christmas, it was all foretold.

CHAPTER 2

Prophets and Profits



Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves.

Matthew 7:15

Through the years, the nation's leading psychics have made all sorts of outrageous claims, none of which, to my knowledge, have ever come true. A few such predictions:

- “Next year there is going to be a great earthquake that is going to turn Florida into an island;”
- Whoopi Goldberg is going to leave acting and join a convent.
- There is going to be a national lottery, and it is going to cut our taxes in half.
- The “Japanese will discover a cure for the common cold—using a chemical found in the ink spewed out by squid.” This idea is not nearly as ludicrous as some of the ink spewed out by psychics, I might mention.
- Major league baseball would have a shot in the arm as they would acquire, “this year,” their first female big league baseball player. (This was predicted in the mid-1990s.)
- A pet food company “will discover that a by-product