

UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

Part 10 – The birth of Jesus

Key Questions:

- Who is Jesus? How can Christians claim that Jesus was both a man and also God?

Luke's Perspective (Luke 2:1-52) – Jesus is born as a human baby

Luke's stories about the birth of Jesus are intended to teach us important lessons about who Jesus was and why He came:

The birth of Jesus (2:1-7)

Who is Jesus? The Messiah, the descendant of King David

- Joseph was a descendant of King David. This is vital for understanding the claim that Jesus is the Messiah. The promised Saviour for God's people must be a descendant of the line of King David.
- Jesus was born in Bethlehem, even though at this time Joseph was living in Nazareth in Galilee. The Old Testament had said that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, the home town of David (see Micah 5:2). The decree of Caesar Augustus came at just the right time to ensure the prophecy was fulfilled.
- Although Jesus was the descendant of a king, he was born in very poor circumstances and his first bed was a manger (an animal feeding trough). He would be a different kind of King, one who would serve His people.

Shepherds meet the angels and come to visit Jesus (2:8-20)

Who is Jesus? The Saviour for *all* people, Christ the Lord

- In first century Jewish culture, shepherds had a bad reputation. They were outside of normal society because they lived in the fields for long periods of time, and many people distrusted them, thinking that they were dishonest.
- The angel promised "good news" for all people. The fact that the message first came to shepherds was proof that the message was indeed for everyone. Jewish people would have been shocked to hear that God chose to tell the good news about the birth of the Messiah to such people of such low reputation first. The Saviour was born for **all** people: poor and rich, respectable and unrespectable. The Bible teaches that all people need a Saviour who can deliver them from their sins, and Jesus would later claim that He had come especially to reach the lost (Luke 19:10).
- The two titles that the angel used when speaking about Jesus are very important:
 - **Christ** = the Greek translation of the Hebrew word "Messiah". This word means anointed or chosen one, and is a title to describe the special messenger and Saviour from God promised in the Old Testament.
 - **The Lord** = ruler. In Jewish usage this was usually a name for God. Jewish people were very strict to worship only God. No human person would be called Lord. Jesus is more than just a man (this will be clearer in *Part 11*).

Jesus is presented at the Temple (2:21-40)

Who is Jesus? A light shining from God to all nations, but also one who would suffer

- Mary and Joseph were in the Temple in Jerusalem fulfilling two Old Testament laws: one that required mothers to be purified 40 days after giving birth (Leviticus 12:1-8) and another that required first born sons to be presented to God (Exodus 13:2, Numbers 18:15-16). They were faithful Jewish parents obeying God's Law.
- The recognition of Jesus by Simeon and Anna, two old people who were waiting for the Messiah, is a reminder that His coming fulfilled the promises given centuries before his birth and recorded in the Old Testament. The "consolation" of Israel (verse 25) is a term for the time when the Messiah would come and bring new hope to the nation.
- Simeon made two separate prophetic statements about Jesus, which give us insights into what we should expect to see in the life of Jesus:
 - a) *Jesus will bring salvation to people from all nations* (verses 29-32) – "Gentiles" means all non-Jewish nations. This is an important statement, as we realise that the good news about Jesus will be for people from every ethnic background. It will bring light (meaning knowledge of God) to the Gentiles and glory to Israel.
 - b) *Some will accept Him, but others will reject Him* (verses 34-35) – Simeon foresaw that reactions to Jesus would be mixed: some people will be raised up as a result of Him, while others will fall. He will be a "sign" that God is at work, but some people will speak against Him. As we study the life of Jesus, we will discover that many people, especially among the religious leaders, rejected and opposed Him. Simeon also said that a sword would pierce Mary's heart, foretelling the great suffering of Jesus that Mary would witness.
- Although we don't read what Anna actually said, it is clear that she too believed that Jesus was the one who would bring about "the redemption of Jerusalem". Anna was clearly identifying Jesus as the Messiah.
- Luke's statement in verse 40 emphasises the fact that Jesus was a human boy who had to develop physically like any child but that He also had great wisdom, so that people could see that God's grace was on Him.

Jesus visits the Temple aged twelve years (2:41-52)

Who is Jesus? God's Son

- This story has one main point. Although Jesus shows unusually great knowledge for His age, the real issue is who His father is. Mary describes Joseph as Jesus' father (verse 48). Joseph was His father by adoption and because he cared for Him, but he was not Jesus' genetic father. Jesus emphasises this by saying that He has been in His true Father's house, meaning the Temple, the house of God (verse 49). Even as a child Jesus knew His true identity.

John's Perspective (John 1:1-18) – God becomes human in Jesus

John describes Jesus' birth in a very different way from Luke. Whereas Luke writes from a human perspective about how people saw Jesus, John writes from God's perspective. John explains how Jesus existed forever before His own birth and how He came into the world. He gives us insights into both who Jesus is and why He came into the world:

| WHO JESUS IS | WHY JESUS CAME |
|--|--|
| "The Word" (verse 1) | To make God known to people (verse 18) |
| The One who was with God "in the beginning" (before the Universe was created) (verses 1-2) | To show people the glory of God (verse 14) |
| God (verse 1) | To reveal God's grace and truth (verse 17) |
| The Creator of all things (verse 3) | To give us a new kind of relationship with God – so that we can become His children (verses 12-13) |
| The One who has life in Himself and gives it to others (verse 4) | To give light to all men in this world (verse 9) |

Some phrases in this passage teach us a great deal about Jesus and His mission and deserve special mention:

The Word (verses 1 and 14) – God communicates to us

This may seem like an unusual title for Jesus, but it teaches us much about His mission. It emphasises the fact that He is God's communication to us. The Bible teaches that God has always been communicating with mankind: through the world He has created, through our conscience, and through the Bible. Jesus, however, communicates God to us in a greater way than anything else ever could. If we want to know what God is like we only need to look at Jesus.

The Unique One, who is Himself God (verse 18) – God is three persons in one (Trinity)

John very clearly teaches that Jesus was God. Many other verses in the New Testament also show that Jesus is God:

- John 10:30 – Jesus and the Father are one
- John 20:28-29 – Thomas calls Jesus "*My Lord and my God!*" and Jesus commends him for it
- Philippians 2:6-8 – Jesus was "*in very nature God!*" but became human
- Colossians 1:15 – Jesus is the "*image of the invisible God!*"
- Hebrews 1:3 – Jesus is "*the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of His being!*"
- 1 John 5:20 – Jesus is "*the true God and eternal life!*"

Jesus had a special relationship with God as His Father which was different from the normal way in which Jewish people spoke about God. In fact, Jesus even claimed that He and the father were one (John 10:30), meaning that they are one person (the Jews recognised this as a claim by Jesus that He was God, and tried to kill Him because of it – see John 10:33). Here in John chapter 1, Jesus is described as the "*One and Only!*" – this expresses the unique relationship Jesus had with the Father as the only "begotten" Son of God – the only Son who shares God's divine nature. In *Part 14* we will read more about Jesus' own claims to be God.

The claim that Jesus *is* God as well as being *with* God may seem confusing. The Bible teaches that there is only one true God, but we learn from the New Testament that there are three persons within God who are equal in power. In fact this truth is also found in the Old Testament, but less clearly (the plural in Genesis 1:26 for example). The three persons have only one purpose, and always work together. However, they each relate to us in different ways, and they also have a relationship with one another. So, the Word can be God but also be with God (the Father). The three are:

1. **Father** – often referred to simply as "God"
2. **Son** – the Word who became human and lived among us (verse 14), taking the name of Jesus
3. **Holy Spirit** – who lives in every true Christian

This is a difficult idea for us to understand because we are used to thinking of ourselves as individuals with only one personality and identity. God is greater than we are, and it should not surprise us if we cannot fully explain His nature. However, we must accept the Bible's teaching that the Father, Son (Jesus) and Holy Spirit are equally God. Christians often describe this reality as the "trinity" (meaning "three in unity"), although this word is never used in the Bible.

Unfailing love and faithfulness (verse 17) – God is always true and always loving

Other versions of the Bible translate these words "*grace and truth!*". These two words summarise Jesus', and therefore God's, character. He is equally balanced in truth and grace. God is always true and always right, but He is also always loving. Jesus was full of both truth, meaning that He never said or did anything wrong, and love, meaning that He never did or said anything that was unkind or unloving. This is a great proof that He was God as no one else could ever be so perfect. John could write later about Jesus: "*there is no sin in Him!*" (1 John 3:5). The fact of God's truth and love is the basis of the greatest problem of the Bible. We have sinned against God, but He still loves us and wants to forgive us. How can God just forgive our sins without doing something wrong? How can He remain perfectly true and yet accept us into relationship with Him? The solution to the problem is found in the cross of Jesus. He died in our place, taking the punishment for our sins, so that God can remain right and uphold the truth (He has punished our sins in the death of Jesus) but also forgive and accept us.

Children of God (verses 12-13) – God wants us to love Him to

John says that many people rejected Jesus (verse 11), but that those who accepted Him and trusted in Him were given a new right to a new relationship with God. They can become God's children. They are not God's children in the same way as Jesus (He is the "*one and only Son!*" – verse 14), but Christians can have a close, intimate relationship with the Father. This relationship is based on faith, which means accepting God's word and depending on Him to save and lead.

Key Lesson: Jesus was both man and God and came to make it possible for us to know God

Luke and John teach us a lot about who Jesus was and why He came. He was the eternal God born as a human baby. He was both the Messiah descended from King David and the unique Son of God who had no beginning. He came to reveal God to us and to make it possible for us to become God's children through faith in Him.