



The Word Became Flesh

Stories of the Advent of the Christ

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Foreword

“The Word became flesh...” (John 1:14) God-breathed words speak of the breathtaking event: God’s ultimate and final communication to all humanity. “In these last days, he has spoken to us by his Son.” (Hebrews 1:2) At the hinge of history, God’s truth was not fragmentary, but embodied in human perfection. God’s Word was no longer delivered in packets or parcels, but in the Person of Jesus Christ.

John the Apostle was awed at this supreme audio-visual. “We have *heard* ... we have *seen* ... what our hands have *touched* ... the Word of life.” (1 John 1:1) All sincere believers should be filled with wonder at the Word.

If Easter is the *focal* celebration of the Christian faith, Christmas must be called the *fascinating* celebration. “Beyond all question, the mystery of godliness is great: he appeared in a body, was vindicated by the Spirit ... seen by angels ... preached among the nations ... believed on in the world ... taken up in glory.” (1 Timothy 3:16)

But how does a preacher communicate the wonder of the Word-made-flesh, each year, with faithfulness and freshness? In the Biblical “Christmas story,” God orchestrates and weaves together the strands of many individual stories. God enters into our human experiences, and fulfills the ancient prophecies, in order to accomplish his plan to redeem our lives. These Advent Stories seek to apply God’s Word to our flesh-and-blood lives, for the glory of God.

I personally identify with Joseph. I imagine him as a very orderly person, with a low tolerance for ambiguity. I must confess that, like me, Joseph loved to stay in control! But God, in infinite wisdom, chose to transform Joseph through disruption and upheaval.

Most of these stories were first written and printed in booklet form at Advent 1992, in Miami, Florida, among friends who lived and loved each other after the destruction of hurricane Andrew. While rebuilding our lives, we tried to bear witness to the new Day and new Creation that is promised in Jesus Christ. You may identify with other characters. The stories were revised in the overflow of worship among God’s people living in an affluent Atlanta neighborhood. Like the ancient Magi, we had to discover that real joy comes only when we devote our “wisdom and treasures” to the true worship of the King of kings.

Serving with my denomination’s international student ministry, I thought of the Magi, scholars and seekers from the east. With the Shepherds, I was reminded that the Gospel is Good News of great joy, for all peoples and nations!

Now, as I near 75 years old, I think of Simeon who praised God in his old age. Whatever your story, I pray for you to receive this Gospel of great Joy.

Rev. Al LaCour
Advent, 2022

Joseph – A Quiet Servant

Always go with the Grain



Look at all of that woodwork! There's some quality workmanship right there. There must be thousands of board feet of finished wood in that! And all that sheathing – there must be many wagonloads of “1 x 8's.” And every board is set perfectly into the next one. Those boards aren't just lapped over each other, either! No sir, no crummy construction will do for a house of God. That's some fine “T and G” construction. (That means “tongue and groove” for any of you folks who never have picked up a hammer or saw.) The idea is that every edge on one board must fit neatly and tightly into a groove on the next board. Then everything will line up perfectly! And I really appreciate that. I work with wood all the time.

I always like to see things stay neat, tidy and perfect. Wouldn't it be great if life was always “tongue and groove”? That way, anything that ever happened would fit right into what happened next. When your life was finished, it could just be polished up a bit. And there'd be no gaps, no leaks, and nothing that wasn't a perfect fit!

When I served as a young apprentice to my father, I believed God would make sure that my life stayed tongue-and-groove. But right before I got married – about the time that you call “the first Christmas” – I started to think that God had gone from acting tongue-and-groove to being tongue-in-cheek. But, I'm getting ahead of myself...

Now, just look at the massive beams! They are so strong! They support the whole roof on this place! Look how they brace each other. And all the beams come together at the top. Someone put some real thought into that design. There's some real order and reason above your head, folks!



Now admit it – wouldn't it be comforting to think that there's a perfect plan, some sturdy structure that shelters your life? If there's some order or pattern above you, then maybe you can deal with all the details down here. Even if you don't spend much time looking up, you hope that God has some Great Design above it all. And, if he has everything figured out, then things won't come crashing down on top of your head! Don't you hope there's some perfect plan so that all the pieces of your life will fit together, working together like they should?

You're probably wondering why I pay so much attention to all that wood. *You* probably don't think much about it. Well, it's 'cause I'm a carpenter. Truth is, if a real craftsman knows his trade, you probably won't notice his work. It's when he's botched something that you take notice. If a door doesn't close right, if the cupboards stick ... if the floor's not level, or the miters aren't straight ... then you're gonna call me up and complain. That's why I always try to make everything right and perfect. I want to be like one of those beams up there ... strong, supportive, straight, and not calling much attention to myself.



Now admit it – you don't pay much attention to me in the Christmas story, do you? You picture me as one who never said too much, who stood between the beautiful mother and the trusty old donkey I led all over the Middle East. I tell you, sometimes I felt like *I was a donkey* being led around on God's bridle. Now, it's time for you to hear what happened – from my point of view.

A Carpenter and a Lady

You folks have gotten the idea that I'm much older than Mary. Well, you're not really far wrong, but you may not understand. Like most Jewish brides in those days, Mary was just a teenager. And I was about twice her age. I wanted to be like good, seasoned lumber – cut from good timber (from the stump of Jesse, the family tree of David) – milled to a nice, straight, predictable edge.



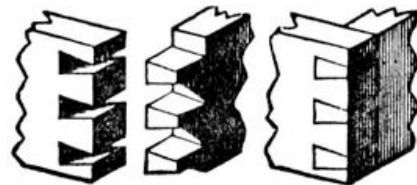
Of course, by now you know the way I like to do things. I do it right and just take one step at a time. First, I got my carpenter's license. Then, I opened my own workshop. With my own business, I could support my wife. It's like when you "mortise" a piece of furniture. When you join things, they need to be real secure. Later on, they will have to bear some serious weight. You don't want things to come apart on you!

But, as carefully as I had planned, things did start coming apart! Working with people is sure different than working with good, seasoned lumber.

Ah, but Mary was the joy of my life! For just a peasant girl, she was like a princess in my eyes! Sometimes, I could not take my eyes off of her – she was young, radiant, and full of joy. She was so fluid, so trusting, so vulnerable – so totally unlike me! Sometimes, she would burst into a song of praise to our God! And to hear the sound of her voice was enchanting. She was my "rose of Sharon". I would be her lover, protector, and good provider – her predictable and faithful husband.

Now, unlike you young people, we didn't just "date" and then decide to get "engaged". Marriages were arranged between two Jewish families. Of course, you could give your parents "hints" when you were interested in someone. But a marriage was like a business contract, a solemn covenant between two families. The two fathers did the negotiating. Then, Mary and I were "betrothed". We stood before each other; our parents spoke a benediction, and we tasted from a cup of wine. We were committed for life. A wedding date was set. But we had to live with our families for about a year. It was like being married and chaperoned at the same time!

Now, those customs may seem strange to you, but that was the proper Jewish way. And I always try to do things right. For me, life should be "plumb and level." Everything was "dovetailing" for us, like the panels in the cedar wedding chest I had started to handcraft for Mary. But then everything fell apart. My life would never be "plumb and level" again!



The “Knot” of a Dilemma

Suddenly, Mary seemed preoccupied. I couldn’t understand. She was no longer absorbed in our wedding plans. She seemed so distant. Why did she take those long walks alone, without me at her side? She was never unkind. But she was no longer free-spirited. Something was going on inside her. I hardly dared to ask. But I had to know. I had to feel in control again. Events seemed to be controlling me, not the other way around. I was in the dark about what was going on. I was worried.



I asked, “Was there something I could do?” “Was there anything that I had done wrong?” I wanted everything to be just perfect for my Mary! I wanted things to follow our plan.

She said, “No, it has nothing to do with you, dear Joseph; this is about something else.”

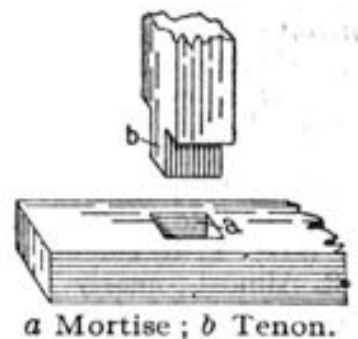
I asked Mary, “Do you want to talk about it?” “I need to talk,” she said, “but first to someone else.”

Why couldn’t she tell me? I was handy. I could fix whatever troubled her! Give me the time, and I could straighten things out!

“No, kind Joseph,” she said, “I want to go to my cousin’s – I need to talk with Elizabeth. ¹ She is even older and wiser than you. I need to talk with another woman.”

I had never heard Mary call herself a “woman.” It was so strange.

Why were things no longer fitting together for us? What had happened to all my right angles and straight lines? I tried to work on the wedding chest. But the “burled” lid was a picture of the churning in my heart and the twisting in my stomach. While Mary was away with her relatives, I was in agony. When she returned, I was shattered. Mary said, “Joseph, ‘I’m pregnant!’”



¹ Luke 1:39



How? Who? Not me! We had pledged to God to remain virgins! How could a young girl, so full of the love of the Lord, become pregnant? Mary's explanation was so incredible that it was simply unbelievable. She said the angel Gabriel had appeared to her.² I must tell you, not once during that difficult time did an angel actually *appear* to me. I was left alone with my dreams and nightmares. I was torn between my head and my heart.

How could the living God "father" a human child? Sure, God can make arrangements for a miraculous birth. Abraham and Sarah had laughed at the idea of having a baby in their old age.

But there was nothing for me to laugh about! I wasn't *that* old, and this certainly wasn't *my* baby.

If Mary was telling me the truth, then her pregnancy was unlike any other. Even if I did believe her – and I *wanted* to believe her – no one else would! In a little town like Nazareth, the prying eyes of neighbors can be worse than the most careful building inspectors!

"So now, Mr. Straight Edge," I argued with myself, "what is right now?" With my mind, I still agreed with the law of the Lord. The rules were clear, the lines were drawn. An unfaithful woman should be brought to trial, made a public example, and be divorced. Mary could be stoned to death – if she had been sexually unfaithful. But, in my heart, how could I possibly do that to her? Now there was a "knot" in the grain of my life. Should I start over? I felt as if a big circular saw had cut right between my heart and my head.

If it had not been for an angel's voice that I heard in a dream, I would have gone with my head: "Divorce Mary, but be tender and discreet."³ Instead, the Lord gave me my heart's desire – Mary would be my wife – but the child would not be my son! One of your poets described my feelings at that time:

"Lord, I know He's now my own,
Not of my flesh, not of my bone.
Still, Father, let this baby be
The Son of my love."⁴

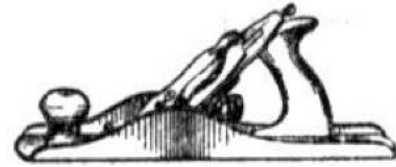
² Luke 1:26

³ Matthew 1:18

⁴ Michael Card, *Immanuel: Reflections on the Life of Christ* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1990), p. 41.

“Planned” to Fit into God’s Plan

Now, you know most of the story about how Jesus was born. But try to put yourself into my shoes. I’ve always been very practical and deliberate. I always worked from plans – *my plans!* And I *like* straight lines. But now, nothing was predictable about our lives. Instead



of being a carpenter, with a shop, a home and a white picket fence, I became a dreamer and a constant wanderer. Because of Caesar’s orders, Mary and I had to go to Bethlehem for a census during her last trimester. Because of Herod’s jealousy, we had to flee to Egypt. We thought we’d go to Jerusalem, but we had to detour to Nazareth.⁵ One of your poets could have overheard my prayers to God back then:

“Father, show me where I fit into
This plan of Yours.
How can a man be father to the Son of God?
Lord, for all my life I’ve been a simple carpenter:
How can I raise a king?
How can I raise a king?”⁶

You know, I’ve learned something about God’s plan. It isn’t really neat and tongue-and-groove, and laid out side-by-side like I used to think. It’s more like one of those jigsaw puzzles I used to cut out for Jesus and his half-brothers when they were small. Mary and I thought we were being jerked around between Nazareth, Bethlehem, and Egypt. But all the pieces really fit together: the Messiah was to be born in the City of David. The Scriptures said, “Out of Egypt I have called my Son.”⁷ And Jesus was to be called a Nazarene. Everything went according to a plan – but it was *God’s* plan – not my plan!

Parenting is Like Sandpaper



I know you’d like to know more details about when Jesus was a boy. Everyone keeps asking me those questions. I suppose that’s because God didn’t give you all the details. And you – like everyone else – want to know more than God tells you. He doesn’t owe you all the answers, you know – he reveals just enough!⁸

⁵ Matthew 2:22

² Michael Card, *Immanuel: Reflections on the Life of Christ* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1990), p. 41

⁷ Hosea 11:1, Matthew 2:15

⁸ Deuteronomy 29:29

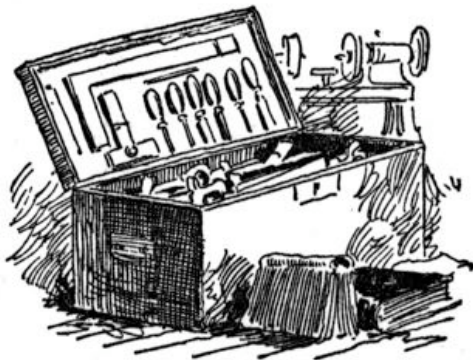
I'll only tell you what you can learn from your Bible. But I can honestly speak as a foster parent and a carpenter. Those were “sandpaper years” for me. God used my being a parent to wear down my rough edges. Of course, I was very proud of Jesus. When he said, “I am the door,”⁹ I imagined that he learned about doors in my carpentry shop. When he called out, “Abba, Father”, I'd remember how once he called me “daddy.” But I am not Jesus' real Father. I hope that I was a good (though very imperfect) “father on earth.”

Parenting is always a challenge. And Jesus was the ultimate “child prodigy.” Some say that birth-order makes a difference. There was some “sibling rivalry” in our family. Jesus' half brothers: James, Joseph Jr., Judas and Simon, along with the sisters, didn't really believe in him until after he was raised from the dead. So there was tension in our home. I have to confess that it really hurt my ego when I heard people criticize Jesus: “How can he say, ‘I came down from heaven’ ... Isn't this the *carpenter's* son?”¹⁰ Now, that really hurt!

But Jesus really didn't belong to our family. He wasn't like me. He had a zeal for his real Father's holiness, compassion, wisdom and truth. In a sense, he was Mary's son, but he truly belonged to God, to Israel, and to the world!

You also should know that Jesus was very strong-willed. I would even call him “willful”, if you can understand what I mean. He was “full of God's will.” In him alone, willfulness was not sin. If there was friction, it was because I was rough and abrasive. Sometimes, my will and Mary's will were not the will of his Father in heaven. At those times, anyone committed to doing God's will was his true relative. Like that time he disappeared and insisted on talking with the rabbis in the temple.¹¹ Jesus was a *perfectly obedient* child – obedient to God.

Take it from a Carpenter



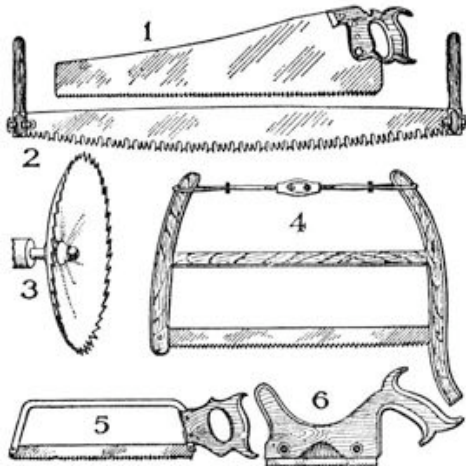
I think I need to correct a fable that still floats around. It's found in what you folks call “the Apocrypha.” Some silly person must have invented the story. It says that I was in my shop one day, when Jesus served as my apprentice. According to the story, I cut some beams with my saw, but I made the mistake of cutting some of them too short. So, as the story goes, Jesus decided to lengthen the beams to make them the correct size.

⁹ John 10:7

¹⁰ Matthew 13:55

¹¹ Luke 2:49

It's true that Jesus was an apprentice in my shop at Nazareth. And he was also called a carpenter. I certainly made lots of mistakes, and not just in woodworking. Mary and I were far from perfect parents. Some folks still insist on putting Mary up on a pedestal, but I can tell you that we were both sinful, just as you are.



Most of you are better educated than I am. You know that story doesn't "square" with the real miracles that Jesus did. Jesus did not come to earth just to "remodel" things, lengthen some beams, or put a fresh coat of varnish on things around here. His work was not just to "remodel" or "renovate" but to "recreate" the world. His work could not be accomplished with hammer, jigs, saws, and ten-penny finishing nails. His work required that spikes be nailed through his hands and feet.

So take it from an old Jewish carpenter. I always thought that life was supposed to stay "tongue and groove", everything dove-tailing in a straight line. But only God is straight; only his blueprints are perfect. Our timber is warped. We're full of knots. First God forgives us, and then he bends and shapes us into what he is creating. We are his workmanship.¹²

You cannot yet see what the Carpenter of Nazareth is building for you out of the wood of Calvary's cross. But I can tell you this – it will make this place look like my old tool shack by comparison! You are going to love what God can do with a bunch of bentwood!



¹² Ephesians 2:10

The Innkeeper – Take a Look at Yourself!

You are so Prejudiced!



Do you know why you are often called “Ugly Americans?” It’s not the way you look in the mirror, but the way you behave on the road. You can be so rude when you travel. You think that everything should be convenient – handed to you on a silver platter!

Just think about your holiday plans. Maybe you will call your travel agent, take an airport limousine, hop on an airplane, and fly off to visit the folks in New York, San Francisco, or Seattle, or Minneapolis. You never once think of all those little towns 35,000 feet below you!

Or, perhaps you are on a tight budget. So, you decide to drive. Even if you don’t want to spend a lot of money, you still demand total convenience! It’s no longer “over the river and through the woods to Grandmother’s house we go.” You want to “get there” just as fast as possible. You log on to the Internet, or call AAA to plan your itinerary. Or, you pull out your road atlas and your favorite motel directory. You then phone an “800-toll free number”, make a reservation, and charge it on your plastic for convenient payment next January.

Once you get underway, what do you do? You pretty much just stay on the interstate highways and the turnpikes. Of course, you will complain if you don’t find clean restrooms. And you will finally drag yourself into some motel lobby at sundown. You will hustle your tired kids next door for a convenient meal at the family restaurant. Then, you’ll rush back to your room to catch a cable movie. You dads will already be peeking at the road atlas for the next day’s drive. Which is so silly – because you’re not going to leave the superhighways until you are within fifteen miles of your destination. After your convenient “wake up call” from the front desk, it will be into the motel lobby for some free juice, coffee and donuts – and then you will be on your way again!



You never once stop to think about all the folks who work so hard to serve you and make your life convenient! There’s the airline reservations agent, the waitress at the fast food restaurant, and the night manager behind the motel reception desk. And just look at me – you have never understood the situation that I was in on that first Christmas!

Sure, sure, I admit that I turned them away in the lobby. But listen. Just try this: When you get home, look up an “800 number”, and call the Bethlehem Hilton. “Hello? Shalom! I’d like reservations for four please – that will be for one night. I’d like a non-smokers room, first floor, guaranteed for late arrival. That’s right, for my wife, the two kids, and me. That will be for the evening of December 24th – Yes, I know that is Christmas Eve!” Let’s just see what kind of accommodations you can come up with!

Now, I wasn’t a night manager at a Hilton hotel. There were no Hilton’s, no Marriott’s, and certainly no Ritz Carlton’s back in those days! Bethlehem is what you’d probably call the “county seat” of Judea. It’s only about five miles down the road from the Capitol City of Jerusalem. Bethlehem is one of those towns that people like to be *from*. There’s an historical marker at the edge of town, “King David born here.” But only a few thousand people lived here on that first Christmas, and we didn’t get many tourists. I ran a little “bed and breakfast” – little guys like me really struggle to make ends meet, in order to live in our hometowns.

I’m just a hardworking small town businessman – looking to make a few shekels, trying to scrape by, to provide my family with some kind of living. Those times were very hard. The economy was terrible. All you could say about the government was that it was stable. But it stunk!



Herod reneged on his promise of “no new taxes”. I think some Roman “higher ups” pressured him. Politicians are all alike – concerned only for their egos, and not for the little people out in the small towns, who have to work all their lives to earn a living.

I know that some of you have seen the same thing. There’s a quaint little motor court on some U. S. Highway, and it supports a modest family with a decent, honest living. Maybe there’s also a grocery store, a hardware store, and a small post office. And perhaps there’s a courthouse on the Town Square.



Then some politicians come along and decide to run new interstate just eight or ten miles away from downtown. That’s great if you happen to own some property along the new superhighway. But don’t you know what’s going to happen to that little guy who owns the motor court?

Anyhow, Herod got everybody all patriotic to restore our Jewish culture and the beauty of Zion. So, he starts attracting everybody to jobs in the big city. But I'm not going to be fooled by some darned politician – Herod was never one of us. He loves to be called a “king”, but he's just a two-bit political appointee. Herod is not like our own favorite son, David. He was a man after God's own heart.¹³

Of course, no one ever accused Herod of being stupid. His whole family is smart – like foxes.¹⁴ But the only way Herod keeps his government job is by licking the hand of Caesar. He will draw his pension at the pleasure of Rome. And all that public works spending up in Jerusalem was for his own ego. Herod's just a shrewd and corrupt politician. He was certainly no son of David!

Have you ever noticed that it's the “little guys” who get chewed up in the government red tape? Just think of all the millions of faceless little people, who had to travel all those miles, just to sign up for Caesar's tax rolls! Do you think Augustus Caesar, sitting in his palace on the Tiber, ever thought of little people like me? Do you think governor Quirinius knew all the pain and inconvenience that would be caused? Of course not! First, the politicians put all their tax revenues into big cities like Jerusalem and Caesarea. Then the bureaucrats turn around and send everyone back to their hometowns for a census. And they expect a small-time motor court operator like me to provide enough accommodations!

Of course, you will remind me that God used that census to get Jesus born in the right place and at the right time.¹⁵ It's always comforting to know that God is in control and he can overrule politicians' plans to organize the whole world around their own egos. But all I got from that census was more taxes and an overcrowded inn. I'm really just a victim of changes in the tax code!

That poor Galilean couple was inconvenienced too. If it weren't for the Roman bureaucrats, Mary and Joseph would have never landed on my doorstep. They had to travel about ninety miles, and she was *very* pregnant. The “fat cats” in government offices, in far off cities, never understand the hardship they do to little people. Augustus Caesar didn't give one rip about that road-weary couple! And he couldn't have cared less about me either.

So don't put me down as such a villain. Herod was a fox; Governor Quirinius was a bureaucrat; Emperor Caesar was egotistical and greedy. But God was in control, Mary and Joseph were on the road, and I was just one little guy trying to make an honest living.

¹³ 1 Samuel 13:14

¹⁴ Luke 13:32

¹⁵ Luke 2:1ff

A Christmas Villain?

Some of you rank me up there with Pontius Pilate and Judas Iscariot. But I never washed my hands of Jesus. I certainly never betrayed him with a kiss! I just told Mary and Joseph, *“I’m sorry, but that traveling salesman from Caesarea just got my last room.”*



Some of the luxury hotels up in Jerusalem would have been even less accommodating. I won’t mention my competitors by name. But, I’ll tell you how the big hotel up the road would have treated them. It’s the five-star luxury hotel where the Roman provincial governor stays when he comes to Jerusalem from Caesarea. One look at a pregnant lady, and the concierge would laugh them out of the lobby. *“What do you think we’re running here, a maternity ward? – Why don’t you try the charity hospital downtown?”* Anyhow, that tired couple didn’t come to Jerusalem. They came to my hometown, to Bethlehem. And to my little *“bed and breakfast.”*



We’re still just a *“Mom and Pop”* place. We don’t offer valet parking for your camel like the big operators, but we do offer personal service. We may not get the big convention traffic, but we try to provide clean linens and extra blankets. You won’t get a chocolate on your pillow, but you will get some good, honest hospitality. We try to cater to the ordinary folks. Like one of

your economy chains says it, *“We’ll leave a light on for you.”* That’s the kind of establishment we are – we open our doors to poor ordinary folks – just like that couple from Galilee.

No Vacancy?



Stalls for animals

It’s not that I had no sympathy for the Galilean couple. It’s just that there was no room! If they had read the sign in the window, I would not have had to say a word to them. There it was, in big bright letters, **“NO VACANCY.”** But poor Galileans aren’t always well educated. I do think that they saw the sign. I just think the baby was due any hour. And the husband looked pretty desperate. And that young girl was really exhausted from the trip!

Remember I did not throw them out – they were simply crowded out. Others had gotten to my doorstep first. You know, “first come – first served.” You cannot treat one customer differently than another. Unless, of course, there’s a little gratuity up front! But there was simply no room, at least in the guestrooms. When my wife saw that the little lady was in a family way, she was the one who suggested the cave behind the inn, where we keep the animals.

I wonder – maybe Jesus gets “crowded out” of your life too? You would probably never be so crude as to “throw him out.” But there are so many things going on in your life these days. Maybe your life is so filled with buying groceries, earning a paycheck, paying the bills, getting the car repaired, going to the bank, doing the laundry, planning your holidays – that you simply don’t have any more room in your life. There may be a little space out there on the edge of your life. But not in your prime time, not in your master bedroom, not in your corporate boardroom. Do you put Jesus Christ into the basement of your life? Then, don’t criticize me so much, as though I was so cruel!

Born in the Stable

He shouldn’t have been born in some old cattle trough! Jesus is Lord of heaven and earth. A king like him should have a “royal welcome”! But he was born in poverty, in a cruel, inhospitable world and in a very lonely place. One of your poets has asked:

“But how could this be?
A child in a manger; a place only fit for the cattle to feed.
A birth so despised. But it’s just the beginning
For a Man of Sorrows he’ll be.”¹⁶

That must be it! God wanted to come near. People stay in luxury hotels for fun and privacy. But God wants to come close to everybody! You know what Jesus did? “He was rich, yet for our sakes he became poor.”¹⁷ That way, he makes ordinary folks like us rich. Maybe our lives are like that stable – maybe Jesus was born there so that, one-day, we could live in his castle in heaven.



I Didn’t Recognize Him ... Do You?

Now, I have seen the way you folks welcome dignitaries. Maybe a parade – perhaps even a “ticker tape” parade. Certainly, a real “VIP” would be given a “key to your city,” with greetings from your mayor, and a private reception with your civic leaders. There would be a reserved suite of rooms in your finest five-star hotel.

¹⁶ Michael Card, *Immanuel: Reflections on the Life of Christ* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1990), p. 68

¹⁷ 2 Corinthians 8:9

Just imagine if your president came to your city. There would be a motorcade from the airport all the way to downtown. The highways would be clogged up for three hours. A man would curse, get out of his car, and ask, “Why isn’t this traffic moving? Is there an eighteen-wheeler overturned ahead?” And the guy in the next car up ahead would yell back, “Calm down, buddy, the president is in town!” Then the angry man would notice the helicopters overhead, and say, “Darn, I forgot to read the morning paper – the president is in town!”

I promise you, if the Messiah had just called ahead, and made a reservation, we could have been ready! We would have cleaned the sidewalks, painted over the graffiti, and “rolled out the red carpet” for him. At least, we could have reserved a semi-private room at Bethlehem General Hospital.

You should see Bethlehem now! Our little town is really proud of the most famous Son of David. There are probably at least 20,000 people in our town today. There have been many “improvements” since that first Christmas. They tore down my little motor court. A big church now stands on my land, and Manger Square is the center of activity at this time of year. There is a polished star on the floor where the manger used to be.

Jesus has become big business for Bethlehem. There’s a big celebration – of course, you are already familiar with big Christmas celebrations. There are bus tours of the shepherd fields, souvenir shops, tree ornaments made from olive wood, and lots of colored lights. A candlelight parade is held each year.

But, back then, we didn’t know the Messiah was coming!

Jesus arrived as a total stranger, completely unannounced. He always seems to come as a Stranger! “How strangers treat one another in the random swirl of daily life says something about their society.”¹⁸

Of course, the Bible said that he would be born in Bethlehem! But I really did not pay much attention to the Bible. That Book is for the Sabbath. Most of my days are spent checking the guest registry and reviewing bank statements.

The Bible has told you where you can see Jesus today. But are you paying any more attention to the Bible today than I did back then?

“I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me ... whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.”¹⁹

¹⁸ *Insight Magazine*, 12/2/91.

¹⁹ Matthew 25:35 ff.



There was “no room” for Jesus anywhere in human society back in my day – and maybe that is the big problem in your day too.

Maybe Jesus would find no room in a city hotel. Maybe he would be homeless. But maybe you will get to “see Jesus” when you decorate the “Angel Tree” for a prisoner’s family. Maybe there is a stranger in your church, who you can invite for a Christmas meal. That is how you could show hospitality to Jesus! Provide a guestroom, or an extra place at your table, or more room in your heart!

Do you want to know the very worst thing for me, remembering that first Christmas? I realized too late that the biggest event in human history took place in my hometown, in my backyard, and I missed the whole thing. I missed the big event! Mary and Joseph were there, and the shepherds came in from the fields. But me? I was busy – tying down animals, serving food to my paying guests, handling customer complaints, balancing the books, and changing the linens and towels in the rooms. So I missed the whole thing!

Maybe you should think more about my experience and me this Christmas. It’s easy to get totally absorbed in the regular stuff of daily living, so you could miss seeing him too!

Do You Recognize Yourself?

What I want to know is this – Why do you always try to blame me for what happened to that special couple? Why do you want to criticize my behavior? You so quickly pass judgment on others, so you won’t have to judge yourself! You condemn in other people the same behavior you do not recognize in your own life! ²⁰ Don’t you see why God left out so many details in the story?

“She placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.” ²¹

No “innkeeper” is named – don’t you see yourself in me? I am so much like you! And you are a lot like me! The Lord is not standing outside my door and knocking – but outside your door, and seeking a welcome. The Lord Jesus Christ is standing outside the door to your heart! ²²

²⁰ Romans 2:1ff

²¹ Luke 2:7

²² Revelation 3:20

One of your poets asks you:

“The hard-hearted men
Slam doors in the darkness.
They wouldn’t make room...
But in these days, do we?”²³

DO YOU? Do you make room for the Son of God? Is your heart too overcrowded for Jesus the Messiah? Have the celebrations, pleasures, worries and anxieties of life taken up all the empty space in your heart? *Don’t you see? It’s our own hearts that are the real cattle troughs!*

And that is exactly the place where Jesus Christ wants to be “born again” – right in our own dirty, inhospitable hearts!

²³ Michael Card, *Immanuel: Reflections on the Life of Christ* (Nashville: Thos. Nelson, 1990), p. 68.

The Shepherd – the Wonder of God’s Love

Too Wonderful for Words!

So, you want to know about that night? Not real sure I can tell you. You see, I ain’t real good with words like you city folks. I’ve always been a country boy myself.

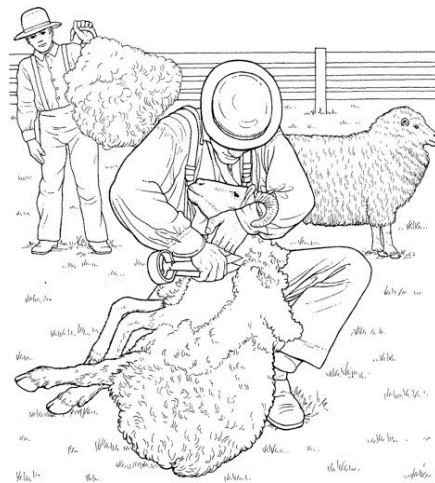


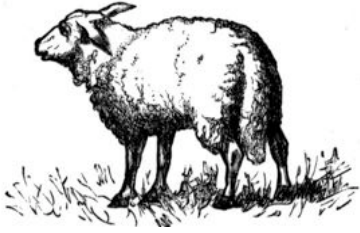
You really drive all the way out here to talk with me? I guess I should feel pretty special. Just think, you come all the way out here in the country just to talk to me! That’s kinda the way I felt that night. Like somebody special went outta their way to come and visit me! I can’t really explain it too good – I’m just an old ranch hand, you know! Not too good with words, like you city folks. Course, I ain’t so sure even you could find the right words to explain what happened that night. It was wonderful – really too wonderful for words! I hope you will find some way to describe what happened to me, so that everyone can hear about it.

Dirty Shepherd – and Dumb Sheep

At first, I felt so grubby, but then, so special. I guess you city folks sometimes have it the other way around. You start your night feelin’ pretty special, but then you feel dirty by the next mornin’. Anyhow, out here that night, it was just the other way around – first, I felt so dirty; but then, so very special!

You say you don’t know what I mean by “dirty”? Well, maybe that’s ‘cause you never been too close to the soil, you city feller! I mean, just look at you, in that white starched shirt and tie! Now me – I live and work out here in the dirt. Why, I’ll bet you keep one of those little kitties in your apartment – they always lick themselves so you don’t have to bathe them. Now me, I always feel like I need a bath. And I don’t keep no prissy little kittens! I keep sheep! And they are real dirty – and pretty dumb, too!





I can tell you that wool sure looks a lot different before it gets put into that fancy overcoat you got on there! And it sure smells different too!

Now that night was kinda cool, and it was damp somethin' awful. And all that wool on the hoof was smellin' real ripe, I tell you! You probably think I'd get used to it, all this ranch work that I do. No sir! Sittin' out here ev'ry night, you have to try to find a dry spot that the sheep ain't messed on. And every mornin' you smell just like last night's campfire. No sir! This ain't no desk job, like you the one you probably got. When you work with sheep like me, you *know* what dirty *feels* like!

You know, it ain't just the sheep – they're just dirty on the outside. It's the people I have to work with too. I mean, the other herdsmen seem just as dumb as the sheep. But they're definitely not innocent lambs! Look at that old guy over there. He's a real boozier. You should hear his mouth when he's had a few too many! And there's that young guy over there – he's always talkin' 'bout some dame. He's always usin' some poor girl, tellin' her that she's special, and then he makes her feel dirtier than one of his sheep!

And me? Well, I try hard to be a family man, but it just ain't easy in this business! 'Cause, what kind of woman wants a shepherd for a husband? And the kids – they really suffer because of me. Their friends are always kiddin' them:

“Your old man stinks like sin!
Always hanging 'round
that old sheep's pen!
You can tell he's comin'
'Cause he's stepped on a turd ...
He's just a dirty old shepherd!”

You know the kind of mean things that kids say to each other!



I always try to remind my kids that “the good book” is filled with shepherds. There's Abraham, Jacob, Moses, and David – many of God's heroes were shepherds! The Bible even says that the Lord is a Shepherd.²⁴ And if we are God's sheep, we might like to act like “smart-alecs”, but we can't be too smart! And if the Lord is our Shepherd, he must not mind getting involved in our dirty, rotten lives. Jehovah must be more than just a personal Shepherd. He's the Good Shepherd!²⁵

²⁴ Psalm 23:1, Psalm 80:1

²⁵ John 10:11

Of course, in some ways, the kids' friends are right. Every night, when I get to the front door, my kids go, whiff, sniff – “Mom, Dad's home!” No one runs to the door to give me a hug and kiss when I get home from work! You might tell your children to wash up for dinner. But my wife says to me: “Be sure to bathe before coming to the table!” I'll bet your son wants to grow up just like you. Not my sons! They want to leave this country bumpkin life and move to the city. And I'm the first to admit it – my family deserves better than me!



An Outdoor Concert

But anyhow, back to that night – I had to work the night shift all that week. And what happened that night was real strange, I can tell you right now! One minute, I'm smellin' all those sheep, listening to all that foul language, and feelin' pretty sorry for myself. Then, all of a 'sudden, I hear all this singin'.



Yep, you heard me right – I said there was singin'! It was some kinda singin' too! You city folks got all kinds of big Christmas productions, musicals, concerts, and all that highbrow stuff. And you probably think that I ain't got no “culture” – I mean, I never had no chance to go somewhere fancy like that Radio City Music Hall, or all those places where you hear such things. Now, I tell you, I ain't never stood in line at no box office, and I ain't never bought no theater tickets. But I didn't need no ticket that night. I got a front row seat for free! And what a production it was!

I'll tell ya' somethin' else, I bet you ain't ever heard nothin' like that night. You see, that singin' was “outta this world”! I mean, it really was!

What do I mean by “outta this world”? Well, you gotta promise not to laugh – O.K.? There were angels! No, I don’t mean I heard singin’ *like* angels – I mean, *there were angels!*



Now, please try not to laugh at me. You gotta believe me. I mean, I could hardly believe it myself. First, I thought it was one of those windstorms. But the air wasn’t howling. I mean, it was *fluttering!* I started thinkin’ that we were bein’ attacked by vultures. There were thousands and thousands of wings!

That’s when there was this bright light shinin’ all around us. It was like the dawn had come early. You *could* say it was the start of a new day in my life. It was like a search light, shining down into the hollers and canyons of my soul. I fell right down on the ground and my face splatted right down into some sheep

manure! Try not to laugh, because I can tell you this – it seemed to be just the right place for me – when I felt all that light from God!

Feelin’ Special

What happened then? Well, that’s when *I started feelin’ special* for the first time in my whole life!

What do I mean, by “special”? Man, city feller, you sure do ask lots of questions! Well, it’s kinda hard to explain to a college boy like you, ‘cause words don’t come too easy to me! But I’m not even sure *you* could explain it with your fancy words!

You see, even though my face was covered with sheep mess – I really felt all clean inside! For the first time in my life. I mean, my kids would say that I still smelled pretty rotten. If you’d been lookin’ at me, with that mess on my face – well, you’d say I looked like hell! But somehow I felt different – like a new man! I was standing there in that holy glare, but somehow I knew that I was now O.K., at least in God’s sight. Somehow, I was clean and “special”!

Even if I can’t explain it too good, I know I was special, ‘cause that head angel – he *told* us so! He said that God had chosen to smile on us that night. Can you believe it? God smilin’ on a bunch of ranch hands on the night shift!

Now I try to tell my wife and kids: “Look, if God’s smiled on you, it don’t really matter anymore what other people are sayin’ ‘bout you – it don’t

matter if you're a shepherd, a banker or a baker, a brick layer or a shop foreman, a butcher, or housewife – 'cause God's said, 'you're special!' And that's all you really need!"



That night, I'm sure most of you city folks were out on the town, enjoyin' your fancy concerts and all your culture. But I'm tellin' ya' the truth – God knows I'm tellin' no lie! All "heaven broke loose" over Bethlehem that night! ²⁶

Good News for All

Now, I suppose God can pretty much choose what kind of company he wants to keep. I guess it's hard for you to believe what I'm tryin' to tell you! To say that God would come down, way out here in the boondocks, and all. I mean, God *could* have come down to a fancy cathedral in that expensive neighborhood of yours. I would not have felt very comfortable there, but God could have chosen to come down there instead. But he didn't ... he came down way out here!

I mean, we didn't expect him. We didn't invite God to show up or anything like that! We certainly weren't expecting a concert! If we'd known God was going to shine on us that night, we'd have told you. You could have come out here to see the whole thing. You could have brought your kids and



maybe even your video cameras. But God just sorta barged in on us ... I'm sure he's got his own reasons. Maybe that's what the head angel meant. He said we should stop shakin' so much, 'cause what was happenin' to us was supposed to be "good news for *all* people"! ²⁷

Now, if God don't mind comin' down to a bunch of dirty old ranch hands, I guess he can come to anybody's old dung heap! But the good Lord always comes when and where he wants to. That's got to be good news for all kinds of folks – even for a sophisticated city slicker like you! I tell you the Gospel truth: you might not always *feel* as dirty as I did, but I'll bet that you've been afraid or lonely in that big city of yours sometimes! The way I see it, everybody needs to feel special and loved – even you!

²⁶ Luke 2:13

²⁷ Luke 2:10

Born in a Barn!



Now what's that? You're asking how I can be sure that I ain't been dreamin' this whole thing up? Well, it's 'cause I saw *him*. Who's that, ya' say? I said, I saw *HIM!* You know, *HIM – God's Son, the Messiah!* And you know what? He was born right in the middle of more livestock! *God was born in a barn.* I mean, *that's about as crazy as angels singin' to smelly shepherds!*

Now listen up, real close, and I'll try to explain something to you. You're a Gentile aren't you? (That's O.K., I don't mind talking with you. The rabbis think shepherds are pretty "unwashed" people too.)

Now let me see if you can understand this. When a Jewish couple has a baby, 'specially a firstborn son, it's party time! I mean, they invite all their friends and relatives over to see their new son. But, that night, these folks didn't have any relatives to share their joy. We were the only ones invited in to visit that night. I mean, that little baby boy wasn't just God – he wasn't ashamed to be our Brother too! We were welcomed and treated like God's family! And if *we* can be God's family – then you can be too!

But here's what is even crazier. You know all those sheep we were takin' care of? They were for that temple up in the city ... to be cleaned up as sacrifices for sin. But somehow I knew that the little baby boy, in the cattle trough, would one day put me out of business – this whole, dirty, rotten business!

Now, my smart city friend, do you think you understand what I mean when I say I started that night feelin' dirty, but ended up feelin' special?

For the Record...

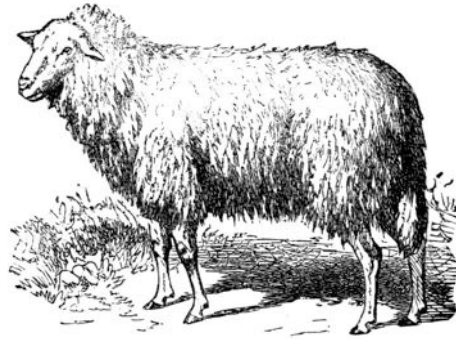
You know, you're mighty curious about all this for a city feller! You sound just like some kind of news reporter. I always did think that night was headline stuff. But nobody up in the city seems much interested in hearin' the story from an old shepherd.

You know what? If I had told people I'd seen a UFO out in the fields that night, I bet somebody would have printed my story. But I ain't never seen UFO's – I seen angels! And I seen God's Son! But nobody seems interested in *true stories* no more. You know, most of that stuff in newspapers looks a pile of sheep manure to me!

Hey, that gives me an idea! You should come out and see me more often. I mean, some damp, cold night – come out and stand with me in a barn. If you could just breathe the smells of a barnyard, then you could sing the good news with the angels! That’s it – smell the barnyard, sing the good news! Smell the stink – sing the songs! That’s it! First, the Gosh Awful and then the Gospel! Bad Smells and Good News! You know, when you stay away from the MESS of life, you miss out on the MAJESTY of the Lord’s grace!

But, what do I really know? I’m just a shepherd! And you’re a whole lot smarter than I am!

You sure know how to ask the questions. I bet I haven’t talked on like this for years! You *are* some kinda news reporter, aren’t you? No? One of those medical doctors, huh? I sure hope you don’t think I’m sick in the head! I haven’t talked to one of you doctors since that Dr. Luke some time back.



Well, Doc, I’m pleased to meet you! I hope I answered all your questions. Like I told that Dr. Luke years ago, I hope you can put my ramblin’s into better words than me. I sure hope you can convince people to listen to my story ²⁸– I’m not real good with words, like you college boys from the big city.

Say, I hope *you* find what you’re lookin’ for! And I hope all you city folks are found by the One who is lookin’ for you! Then, no matter how dirty, afraid, or lonely you feel, you’ll know that you are special – and loved too!

²⁸ Luke 1:1-4

The Angel – at Your Service

A Briefing from the High Command



Good morning, ladies and gentlemen! Please permit me to introduce myself! My name is Clarion. I am a First Lieutenant, from the 777th Tactical Wing, Choral Squadron, previously assigned to the Judean theater of operations. I occupy the position of first chair, trumpet section, in the King's Honor Guard.

The information that you are about to receive has only recently been de-classified by the High Command. A few names have been changed to protect identities. Some details have been obscured to keep military secrets from falling into the hands of the enemy. However, I am authorized to release to you the following information. I hope that you will give careful attention to this important briefing!

I am pleased to be at your service this morning! Let me first congratulate your musicians for that fine singing. As worship goes, that was a first-rate imitation of the real thing, which happens in the place from which I was deployed! I rarely encounter anything of such caliber in these lower territories.

You have probably never seen the likes of me. I doubt that any of you were aware of it when you encountered angels. Of course, that does not mean that you've never had a "close encounter" with one of us! It's just that you rarely see us! We were the very first to employ what you now call "stealth technology."

Sadly, the forces of our Enemy have stolen and employ a similar high-tech camouflage. You must keep your spiritual radar tuned with prayer. Then you can detect the enemy's telltale signature. We angels are under orders to keep you under friendly surveillance. Our High Commander often "scrambles" air defenses to intercept hostile forces that intrude into your airspace. But you really must learn to keep more alert!

**TOP
SECRET**

While you celebrated the end of a Cold War down here on Earth, there was still a “hot war” in unseen sectors! But I want to reassure you that Victory is certain. There has never been any doubt. As you might say here on Earth, “It’s only a matter of time”. The Final Victory is as certain as eternity. The High Command will soon quash the rebellion under the feet of the Crown Prince.²⁹



Nevertheless, you must not be ignorant of your enemy’s schemes.³⁰ There is the constant danger that you will be lulled into a lower state of readiness. You humans make very tempting targets for hostile fire. Don’t let down your vigilance, or you may find yourself in the dark lord’s cross hairs!

We celestial messengers do become visible when ordered by the High Command. When we disengage our invisibility, it is for an important strategic or tactical objective. I am here this morning on a specific mission. I have been commissioned to “de-brief” you about that first Christmas night.



It so happens that I was deployed in the airspace over Bethlehem. Most angels are involved in one of three missions: air reconnaissance, air rescue, or air combat. But the High Command gave our squadron a very special mission. We were couriers of a special announcement. The last decisive battle of the Great War had begun!

²⁹ Genesis 3:15, Romans 16:20

³⁰ 2 Corinthians 2:11



You should have seen the shepherds disperse when we performed the first fly-over! Those poor “recruits” were personally selected by the High Commander to be the very first to know. I tell you, I am constantly amazed at the caliber of inductees for the High Commander’s ground forces. But it’s not for me to understand, but just to obey his orders. I am sure that you are sometimes asked to obey without complete understanding!

Now, I don’t look down on you ground troops. Sure, we “air cadets” are called the “shining ones”. But the “Grand Strategy” to retake the Earth will not succeed without your own efforts down here in the trenches! You are on the front lines! An angel’s mission is simply to provide “close air support” for what *you* are doing down here. There are people all over Earth who still need to be told that the final battle has been won, and that the glorious Victory Celebration is coming soon. But that is *your* mission, not mine! ³¹

I was the very first one to sound the trumpet! The crucial “beachhead” on planet Earth had been secured. The invasion had begun. The Divine Plan was finally set in motion. Our squadron, the Choral Honor Guard, was to herald the good news. The time had come to rise up and join the resistance!

The Beginning of the Rebellion

You may remember that we sang “Glory to God in the highest” and “Peace on Earth”. ³² Now listen closely, for I tell you the truth: *without glory in the highest there can be no peace on Earth.* People may talk about “peace, peace”, but there is no “peace”. ³³ When you praise the Self, and not the Sovereign, there can be no song of joy, only Hell on Earth. That is why ours was a “new song” for the Earth. When the Highest Glory is challenged, the whole Earth is cursed.

³¹ Romans 10:14ff

³² Luke 2:14

³³ Jeremiah 8:11



One entire rank of angels does nothing but restrict access to the Highest Glory. Only the High Commander sits enthroned above those *cherubim*. He alone shines forth with perfection!³⁴ A *seraph*, like me, may sing of his holiness. But no creature – of even the highest order – is admitted to the throne room – except for the Prince. What amazes an angel like me is not that the Crown Prince can approach the throne, but that he chose to draw near to you!

Long ages ago, discord in the heavens brought war to the Earth.³⁵ The book of Genesis describes only the outbreak of the “ground war”. The “Great Rebellion” started at the highest levels, long before hostilities commenced here.

There was sedition in the senior ranks of heaven’s “armed forces”. It was like a “palace coup” – with a chief-of-staff grabbing for imperial powers. Many of the elite and top-ranking officers forfeited their prestigious positions. It was an absolutely insane rivalry! Some of the “best of the best” became the very worst. As one of your writers put it,

“... the higher and mightier it is ... the more (demonic) it will be if it rebels.”³⁶

Rightful honors were forfeited, because highest honors were craved.

One usurper, in particular, was not content with his great authority – he wanted to be worshiped as well. He had great aptitude and was esteemed for outstanding leadership qualities. But he grew very jealous of the Crown Prince. In fact, he became quite impressed with himself! Pompous with pride, he promoted himself as a successor to the throne.

³⁴ Psalm 80:1

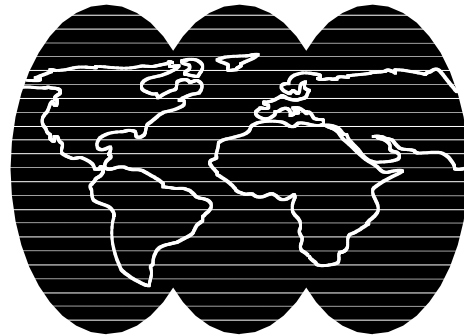
³⁵ Revelation 12:7ff.

³⁶ C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (New York: Macmillan, 1946, pp.97-98)

The Rebellion Gone Underground

Of course, that subtle schemer and all his wicked allies were summarily court-marshaled. Even now, they await their just punishment. They were purged from the service of the High Command. But they have now brought their mutinous, rebellious, subversive spirit to the Earth.

It is no surprise that you Creatures were targeted for attack. When the evil one became God's enemy, he became your Adversary. Only you – you alone – were permitted to bear the image of the High Commander! He is the One they really hate. So these are the real “hell's angels” who now prowl about the Earth. They often conduct underground, clandestine, hit-and-run operations. They spew their rage at the High Commander by preying upon you, our Lord's most cherished creatures.



You seem amazed by my tremendous appreciation for creatures like you – who are formed out of the dust of the Earth! It is true that angels are not bound by gravity, space, and time, like you are. I can understand why you shake with fear whenever we appear. But do not exalt any angel!³⁷ That is the original sin. I am your fellow servant, if you hold the testimony of Jesus.³⁸ My highest calling, and your own, is to serve the King of kings. Worship only him!

But do you remember what one of your own has said?

“Man is a creature whom the Angels ... were they *capable* of envy ... *would* envy.”³⁹

No elect angel would envy you – that would be a terrible sin. But do not forget how privileged you are, you wonderful creatures of dust! You have been offered a second chance. No fallen angel gets a fresh start! You can receive an Imperial pardon for your rebellion. It will never be so for the dark lords of the Abyss. And no holy angel would dream of being called God's Son. Yet, because of his Son the High Commander calls you his own adopted daughters and sons!⁴⁰ Don't you realize that, along with the Crown Prince Himself, you will judge the world – and even us angels?⁴¹

³⁷ Hebrews 1:4-6

³⁸ Revelation 22:8-9

³⁹ Letters: C. S. Lewis / Don Giovanni Calabria (Ann Arbor: Servant Books, 1988), paragraph 8, p. 47)

⁴⁰ 1 John 3:1ff.

⁴¹ 1 Corinthians 6:2-3

So how could I despise your dirt? The Crown Prince certainly did not! He was not ashamed to call you his brothers and sisters! ⁴² No angel is so honored as you! You may be subject to decay – but remember, you can also be raised up to glory!

The Coming of the Crown Prince



The Final Victory was predicted from the start.⁴³ All expectations were focused on the promise of a Male Child. He would be the One to break the unholy alliance between Earth and Hell. And he would deliver the last crushing blow to the evil one.

As you probably know, a number of notable births are recorded in your Bible. Quite often, angel messengers were sent to bless the parents of a promised child. All of these happy events were small but significant tactics in the grand Strategy. Each fulfilled promise was leading up to the final Big Event.

Like your modern “electronic countermeasures”, the High Command kept hostile forces rattled and off-guard before the Invasion. Since the Enemy is not omniscient, he could never really be sure *which* promised child was a “decoy,” and which was the Coming One he most feared. His radar was completely “jammed.” Only *after* the event had happened could he counter-attack. And that is exactly what he did, so crudely and cruelly at Bethlehem.⁴⁴

One of our highest-ranking senior officers was selected to announce the Child’s coming. Gabriel had long before passed encoded secrets of the Grand Strategy to the statesman Daniel.⁴⁵ But the true identity of the Child came as a shock, not just to distinguished men, but even to the angels. The Promised Child was to be the Crown Prince himself! The High Commander was sending his own Son! The very Radiance of the Highest Glory would be born in the form of a man, to rescue you most-favored of all creatures.

⁴² Hebrews 2:11

⁴³ Genesis 3:15

⁴⁴ Matthew 2:16

⁴⁵ Daniel 8:16, 9:21

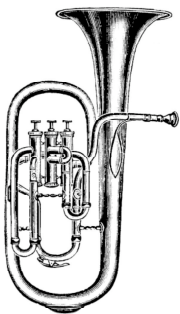
The Wonder of the Cross

The infinite wisdom of the Grand Strategy was now at last made known, even in heavenly places. For aeons, angels had longed to understand these mysteries.⁴⁶ Consider the cherubim, who guard the Glory: They had gazed for years at that “atonement cover” which sealed the chest containing the Ten Commands.⁴⁷ Of what use was all that sprinkled blood? No bloodless angel can substitute for the cold-blooded rebellion of an Earth Creature! How, then, could a bull or goat be a just compensation for a demoted image-bearer?



Now the mystery was manifest! “Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!”⁴⁸ How could I ever grow tired of singing the victory song? The dark powers and authorities can now be publicly ridiculed for their foolish rebellion! How they have victimized you once-innocent humans through the chains of your sins! But the Crown Prince has, at last, broken the bondage by his cross!

Why not Enlist in his Service?



Several angels eagerly volunteered to strike the Earth and roll the stone away, exposing an empty tomb!⁴⁹ A whole squadron of mighty angels pleaded to be dispatched, to escort the Prince home for his coronation. He is no longer just the Lord of heaven, but the rightful Lord of Earth as well. Having made final purification for sins, he now sits at the right hand of the Majesty!⁵⁰ His Name will be exalted over every name in heaven and on earth and under the earth!

⁴⁶ 1 Peter 1:12

⁴⁷ Exodus 25:20

⁴⁸ Revelation 5:12

⁴⁹ Matthew 28:2

⁵⁰ Hebrews 1:3

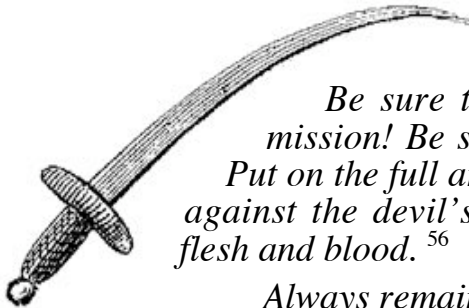
Why not join with the hosts of heaven? Enlist in his service, and serve him as your King! If even just one of you will now turn from your sins to follow the Savior, there will be myriads of angel choirs leading heaven in joyful songs! ⁵¹

Just think of it – you may now do his will on earth, just as we angels do in heaven! ⁵² And he accepts your imperfect service, through faith in his blood. One day, the great archangel Michael will shout from heaven. ⁵³ Your King has said, “I shall return!” – and, he will most certainly come for you, in blazing fire, with all of his powerful angels! ⁵⁴



Ladies and gentlemen, this concludes the briefing. Until Jesus our Lord returns, the High Commander urges you to remember the following points:

Don't give aid to your enemy by engaging in 'FRIENDLY FIRE'! ⁵⁵



Be sure to close your ranks! Keep focused on our mission! Be strong in the Lord, and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes, for your struggle is not against flesh and blood. ⁵⁶

Always remain in a state of prayerful readiness! ⁵⁷

Now, if you would permit me just one personal word: I hope that you will always marvel at the wonderful gift that the High Commander has given to you. Yours is a glorious privilege! Yours is a great responsibility, to serve him!

Have a joyful Christmas, in the Name of our Crown Prince, Jesus Christ!

⁵¹ Luke 15:10
⁵² Matthew 6:10
⁵³ 1 Thessalonians 4:16
⁵⁴ 2 Thessalonians 1:7
⁵⁵ Galatians 5:15
⁵⁶ Ephesians 6:11-12
⁵⁷ 1 Peter 5:8

The Magi – Wisdom Greater than Human Intelligence

Wisdom or Knowledge?



Do you think it is appropriate to call me a “wise man”? I once called myself a “wise man.” But I do so no longer! I wasn’t really so smart – I just thought that I was! Intelligent? Yes, I have an extremely high I.Q.! Well read? Of course! I probably read four - six books a month. In addition, I subscribe to numerous professional journals. Do you want to call me Curious – Inquisitive – Studious? Yes, I am all of those things! But a wise man? No! I have learned that I am really not so wise.

There is a qualitative difference between inherent intelligence and acquired wisdom! Just look at me: I have an earned Ph.D. in Ancient Mid-Eastern studies. I took an undergraduate degree in philosophy, with a minor in mathematics. I have advanced degrees in astronomy and comparative religion. But I have very little wisdom!

Reluctantly, I am forced to agree – the label, Ph.D., simply means “piled higher and deeper”! And I thought I had intellectually arrived! All of my vaunted knowledge led me down a dead end. A person can be very intelligent, and still not be a “wise man.” Life is more than an accumulation of facts and information. It was shortly after that first Christmas that I learned the difference between knowledge and wisdom.

So, please do not call me a “wise man”. Just call me a life-long “seeker” after the truth! I am still seeking, you know! Or, if you wish, you may call me a “fool for Christ”. I won’t be offended. As the old adage goes, “*Ad fontes!*” To the Source! For my entire academic career, I pursued the “*epistemological question*”. I will now devote the rest of my life to the “*christological question*”. *How or what you know* is no longer so important to me as *who you know!* I will never “arrive” at all the answers to life’s mysteries. But now, at least, I know where to begin my search. Facts can be found in books, but wisdom is found in a Person, the One in whom “are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge!”⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Colossians 2:3

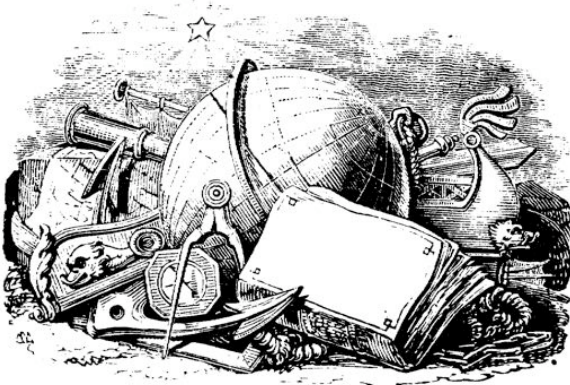
Wisdom not in Untested Assumptions

Now here is a truly intelligent comment: “Do not be self-deceived! If you think you are wise by today’s standards, you should become a ‘fool’ so that you may truly become a wise man.”⁵⁹ Now, that’s something you should really study! So much of what you moderns accept as fact is really just untested prejudice! Yet you think you are so academically sophisticated!



For example, just listen to that Christmas carol of yours: “*We Three Kings of Orient Are.*” Talk about superstitions and untested assumptions! Who said that there were only *three* of us? Just because we brought *three kinds of gifts*, did you assume a one-for-one correspondence, with three *givers*? Not a very scientific deduction! Why not thirty, instead of three in our caravan? An early tradition says there were as many as twelve of us. But you cannot admit that you’ll never really know. And who said anything about our being *kings*? Yet, some of you hold a “Three Kings” festival about this time each year! And whose research said that we were *Oriental*s?

None of those things are really found in your Bible. Why don’t you stop chasing other people’s footnotes! If you were not so mentally flabby, you would do some good objective study in the primary sources. Yet you moderns look down your noses at us, because you think you are so smart. We “magi” are not the only ones who chase superstitions instead of God’s Word!

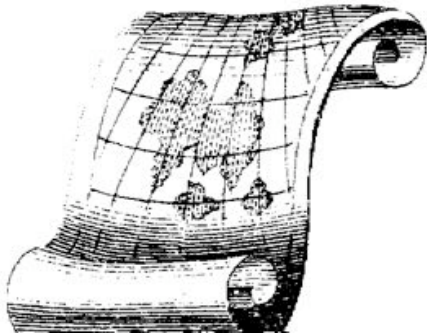


Now here is the primary data. We did, in fact, come from the East. But not as far as the Far East. We were from Mesopotamia, the area of the Medes and the Persians. We were called “magi” – because we were highly educated. Our academic specialization’s include medicine, astronomy, astrology, religion, and the sciences. Persian magi, priests of Zoraster, were the most highly

trained and accredited. Babylonian magi were the first to set up the signs of the zodiac. But the Babylonian “wise men” were often “sophists” – magicians and imposters. As in your own day, there are always some unaccredited “diploma mills” that can make a man a scholar – for a fee!

⁵⁹ 1 Corinthians 3:18

Wisdom not Deduced from Science



Our expedition to Judea began in some dusty libraries, and in many all-nighters under the Mid-Eastern skies. We deciphered various fragile scrolls, and we observed many of the constellations. Then we consulted astronomical charts. All of this began as pure scientific inquiry, but it became something much more than we ever imagined. Our intellectual quest soon became a spiritual journey. We quickly discovered the limits of human science. But we ultimately discovered God's wisdom.

As the Roman historians, Suetonius and Tacitus, had noted: "There spread all over the East an old ... established belief that it was fated for men coming from Judea at that time to rule the world." Because of such rumors, we began to do research on ancient manuscripts found in a Jewish colony in our land. We turned up one fascinating scrap of data. An old Canaanite sorcerer named Balaam had warned the ancient Moabites about a coming Israelite king. The manuscript read: "I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel. He will crush the foreheads of Moab ... Edom will be conquered ... but Israel will grow strong. A ruler will come out of Jacob..."⁶⁰ Comparing those cryptic lines with some rather unusual astronomical phenomena, we felt our hearts skip a beat. We hypothesized that we had stumbled onto something of international significance! Surely, we were on to something special! The adventure of our lifetimes had just begun!

The trouble was – our scholarship soon brought us to a dead end! All of our historical research, and the star charts, had pointed us to the West. But where in Judea should we begin to look? Our scientific research was of no use on that question. We had insufficient data. We needed more clues. We decided to go with human logic. The most obvious place to look was Jerusalem, the capitol of Judea and home of the Judean kings! Where else would a world-conqueror from Israel be born – if not Jerusalem?



⁶⁰ Numbers 24:17-19

We were soon to learn that God destroys the wisdom of the wise.⁶¹ God frustrates the intelligence of the intelligent. Must God defer to a man's wisdom? Does God seek out the world's most notable scholars to be his consultants? Should God endorse our most fashionable philosophies? Why should God not make our "worldly wisdom" look foolish?⁶²

"Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!"⁶³

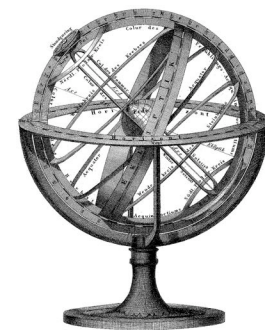
Wisdom not in the Obvious Place



When we got to Jerusalem, we encountered a different species of "worldly wisdom", and a different kind of fool – Herod. Here was a smart king, but not the wise King for whom we were searching. One look into Herod's eyes, and I regretted our decision to look in Jerusalem. We had come to the most *obvious* place – but *obviously*, we had come to the wrong place!

Wisdom is more than intelligence. And wisdom is also more than savvy. A career in scholarship breeds self-glorification. A career in politics breeds self-protection. Both the ivy halls of academia and the marble halls of government are filled with brilliant men – some of whom are utter fools!

Herod was not the first or last politician to be agitated by astrologers. But of all the rulers to fear a star-crossed fate, Herod must have been the most insecure, and certainly the most volatile. He certainly was surprised to see us! And the whole capitol city became disturbed at the news of our quest.



God "catches the wise in their craftiness!"⁶⁴ Our proud calculations had led us to a crafty king, who loved to be called "the Great". He owed his office to "who he knew", but "who he knew" was Caesar, and not God.

Caesar's puppet had no answer for us – but God's Prophet did. "The Christ was to be born ... in Bethlehem in Judea" – the Shepherd King, Who would destroy all tyranny.⁶⁵

⁶¹ Isaiah 29:14, 1 Corinthians 1:19

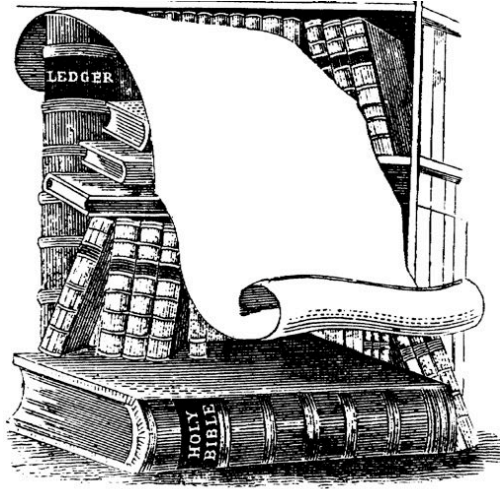
⁶² 1 Corinthians 1:19-20

⁶³ Romans 11:33

⁶⁴ 1 Corinthians 3:19

⁶⁵ Micah 5:1-5

The Wisdom in Consulting the Scriptures



When we entered Jerusalem, we were astronomers and scholars. As we departed for Bethlehem, we were believers – in the Hebrew Scriptures. Until we consulted the Word of God, the pieces did not fall into place. We had traveled for many long miles, searching for clues to confirm our science. But, as we left for Bethlehem, the star went before us, confirming the Sacred Scriptures!

So, was it the Star, or was it the Word of God, that was a lamp to our feet and a light on our pathway? ⁶⁶ The heavens had declared the Glory of God, but it was the Scripture that led us on to Christ! ⁶⁷

You now stand at the threshold of a New Year. A new stage in *your journey* is about to begin. Not everything is clear. The way is dark. There are cruel tyrants to be avoided. There are clever but selfish people, who would take advantage of you, for their own self-promotion and self-preservation. Where will you find the wisdom to guide you? How are you going to make the right decisions? The Lord alone knows the end from the beginning. ⁶⁸ What will guide you closer to him? Only the Word of God!

Take it from someone who finally discovered true wisdom. Do not look for answers in the stars. Do not order your steps by vain astrology, or seek the advice of the shrewd and powerful. Look for light in God's own Word, and be led safely on your journey! Wisdom is not arriving at all the right answers, but in finding the right Way. The Scriptures will lead you to Christ, who is the wisdom and power of God. ⁶⁹

True Wisdom found only in Christ!

This was where our Journey ended. But this is where the Adventure begins for both you and me. Wisdom cannot be found at the altar of your intellect. Wisdom is found in the worship of Christ. "In God's wisdom, worldly wisdom cannot begin to find him."⁷⁰ The Jews were looking for miracles. Like most pagans, I was looking for wisdom.⁷¹ But what I found was Christ, the power and wisdom of God.⁷²

⁶⁶ Psalm 119:105

⁶⁷ Psalm 19:1

⁶⁸ Revelation 1:8, 21:6, 22:13

⁶⁹ 1 Corinthians 1:24

⁷⁰ 1 Corinthians 1:21

⁷¹ 1 Corinthians 1:22

⁷² 1 Corinthians 1:24



At first, I felt a bit silly! Here I was, a scholar, bowing down in front of a crude bassinet. But “the foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man’s strength.”⁷³ At first, you may think that bowing before a crucified King seems foolish. But I tell you the truth, “God chooses the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and the weak things of the world to shame the strong.”⁷⁴

We offered our treasures, the gold, frankincense and myrrh – selected because they were worthy of a King. But, now they seemed utterly worthless. The only true Treasure was the One we had found! And I knew what he really wanted from me – not just my “things,” but the worship of my heart!

Do you want to know something? I had always been so proud of all my degrees, my books, and my published works. But there can be no boasting about mere men!⁷⁵



And there could be no boasting in the presence of him!⁷⁶ For the very first time in a long and distinguished academic career, I felt that I had nothing of value to contribute to humanity. I had absolutely nothing of any significance to say! The living Word had been made flesh, and I was at a total loss for words! It was enough for me to simply bow down and worship him.

My search was over, but my adventure had begun! I had finally found Wisdom. It was not “something” to study, to research, to master, or to teach. Wisdom was not some “thing” at all – it was Someone, a Special Someone, a Person to worship! So please, no longer call me a “wise man”. Just call me a worshiper of Christ!

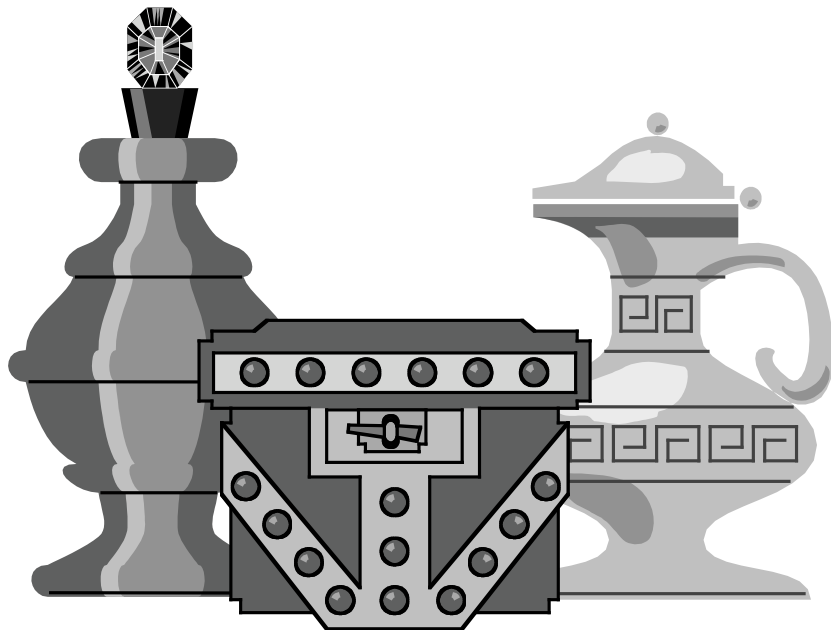
⁷³ 1 Corinthians 1:25

⁷⁴ 1 Corinthians 1:27

⁷⁵ 1 Corinthians 3:21

⁷⁶ 1 Corinthians 1:29

I pray that you will not consider yourself too wise in your own eyes. I pray that the eyes of your heart will be opened ... to know Christ better.⁷⁷ If you lack wisdom, ask God – he will give generously, without finding fault.⁷⁸ Do not put your trust in human wisdom, but in God’s Wisdom and Power.⁷⁹ The “wisdom” of today is nothing.⁸⁰ Do not brag, or call yourself a “wise man.” “Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord.”⁸¹



⁷⁷ Ephesians 1:17

⁷⁸ James 1:5

⁷⁹ 1 Corinthians 2:5

⁸⁰ 1 Corinthians 2:6

⁸¹ Jeremiah 9:23-24, 1 Corinthians 1:31

Simeon – Now, before I Go ...

What was I Waiting for?



I know how young folks find it hard to wait — especially for Christmas! You count down each day on your Advent calendars, open each one of those tiny windows, then recite a Bible promise from God every day until Christmas morning. Each year, right after Thanksgiving Day, you expectantly wait for a month until the big day for your gift-giving and your gift-receiving has arrived.

I've been young and now I am old. And I don't think you know how to wait. Now, you may say, what can that old man know? Maybe you never installed safety bars in your home for stability. But don't poke fun at an old man who hobbles around the city. Don't you remember? God set the plan of salvation in motion through an old man and his old wife who were as good as dead.¹ As one of your writers observed: Sarah and Abraham ... [were] *"laughing at the idea of a baby's being born in the geriatric ward and Medicare's picking up the tab."*² But, God always gets the last laugh! Abraham and Sarah did have the son that God promised, and named him Laughter (Isaac). So laugh with them, not at them!

¹ Hebrews 11:12

² Frederick Buechner, *Telling The Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy & Fairy Tale*

I've been young and now I am old. And I don't think you know how to wait for the most important things. Listen up, young folks, to an old man. And I will tell you what it means to wait.

In the Bible, do you remember how the nation of Israel turned its back on the LORD? So, God decided to stop talking to them. God did not speak again to the nation of Israel for over 400 years!

Then the people got very discouraged. And, politically, things could not have been worse. No true son of David sat on the throne, a kingdom that God had promised would last forever. The mighty Roman Empire occupied the Promised Land. A distant Emperor called "Augustus," the "revered one," ruled the world. Caesar claimed to be divine and was called "Savior of the world." Rome ruled Palestine through a petty, proxy king named Herod.

But I chose to remain in Jerusalem, the City of David, so I could live my life close to God's promises. And, it did seem that the Holy Spirit stayed close to me. The same Holy Spirit, who warned of coming judgment, consoled my heart and brought me comfort. God revealed to me that, if I continued to wait for the comfort of Israel, then I would actually see God's Messiah!

I think you would describe this as a "deferred gratification." God's promises were not fulfilled for centuries! After creation was cursed to die through Adam's sin, God promised that the "Seed of the woman would crush the head of the serpent."³ That was many millennia ago! When would Satan, sin, and death be finally crushed and destroyed by one born of a woman?

³ Genesis 3:15

God promised David that his royal throne would last forever. And, before King David died, he prayed that his kingdom — God’s kingdom — would grow and expand world-wide:

*“May all kings fall down before him, all nations serve him! ... May people be blessed in him, all nations call him blessed!”*⁴



Only God’s throne and kingdom will last forever. King Herod was not a Jew. He was the puppet of Rome. So, the people living in Palestine prayed, *“LORD, how long must we wait? How long before you comfort your people?”*

Then God showed up! We celebrate the miraculous conception of God’s Messiah, born out of wedlock, born to a teenaged peasant girl named Mary. What a miracle! And what a scandal!

Today, people still ask, *“Will the LORD spurn forever? Will he never again be favorable? Has his steadfast love forever ceased? Have God’s promises come to an end for all time? Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has God in anger shut up his compassion?”*⁵

In these last days, scoffers and people follow their sinful desires and ask, *“Where is the promise of his coming?”*⁶

⁴ Psalm 72:11, 17

⁵ Psalm 77:7-9

⁶ 2 Peter 3:3-4

But listen to an old man and I will pass along time-tested wisdom to you young people. Let me teach you some life lessons about waiting and longing for fulfillment — before you get any older.

1. A fulfilled life focuses on God's Promises, not Personal Control

One thing we old folks fear the most is losing personal control. Declining health and mobility force us to ask other people to help us. I think that's what you now call "Assisted Living." That may be preferable to "Hospice Care." But losing "Independent Living" can hurt an elderly person's personal dignity and pride.

Lesson #1: Don't focus on what you cannot do, but on what you still can do. Even after you lose your youthful capabilities, you can still trust and obey God's promises.

That little son of Mary Jesus grew up. Jesus finished the work given to him by his real Father. Jesus was executed on a cross. And he was raised from the dead. Before he returned to heaven, Jesus challenged his follower Peter: *"When you were young, you dressed yourself and walked wherever you wanted. But when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go."* Peter was called to glorify God in a Christ-like death. Jesus commanded Peter to deny himself, to take up his cross, and to follow. Jesus said to him: *"Follow me."* No matter the cost, no matter the sacrifice, even if you face challenges greater than your fellow disciples, Jesus still says to you, *"You follow me."*⁷

Following Jesus Christ does not mean to "stay in control" or to "do what you please." Discipleship means that you glorify God, that you please God, and always trust in the promises of God.

⁷ John 21:18-22

2. A fulfilled life lowers its speed, but increases its focus.

One of my nonagenarian friends once said, “It takes me longer and longer to do less and less.”⁸ One day, when you are elderly, you must conserve your energies to do things that matter the most.

So let’s talk about your life expectancy and your life expectations. Moses only wrote one Psalm in the Bible. And it is a Prayer: “Teach us to number our days that we may gain a heart of wisdom.” Why pray that? Because “the years of our life are seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty; yet their span is but toil and trouble ...”⁹

Now here I am. I am almost 75 years old. In most world cultures, that is a very old man — even with today’s longer life expectancies! I sometimes joke that my pill box is my “abacus.” I count my days with daily medications. I don’t know how much longer I will live. So I want to focus on what is most important to me: relationships — with God, with my family, with my grandchildren, and with serving (but at a slower pace) my extended family in the church.

Lesson #2: Lower your Speed, but Increase your Focus in Life.

3. A fulfilled life looks to the future and does not live in the past.

Memories can be a gift. If you remember your mistakes and bad decisions that can give you wisdom for living today. But nostalgia can become dangerous. Many people fall into the trap of “woulda - coulda - shoulda” living. Some of your friends may behave like they are still adolescents or college students. They don’t grow up.

⁸ Personal conversation with Mrs. Thomas Hal (Mary Louise) Clarke, in her mid-90’s

⁹ Psalm 90:10, 12

But there are no “do-overs” or “go-backs” in life. Thank God for your good memories. And learn from your bad memories. But don’t re-live all of your past accomplishments and experiences.

Lesson #3: Don’t justify your life by your previous successes or wounds, and don’t seek satisfaction re-living your past enjoyments.

Jesus is God’s only righteous Hero and the only worthy Victim. So do not boast like you are a hero, or sulk like you are a victim. Your life is an unfolding Story from God, and not your Argument. Ultimately, God is the Author of your life.

4. A fulfilled life seeks to bless the next generation.



I often pray with the Psalm writer: *“Even to old age and gray hairs, O God, do not forsake me, until I proclaim your might to another generation.”*¹⁰

A friend of mine once paid me a nice compliment: *“You age, but you never grow old.”*

Do you want to know my secret, my personal anti-aging formula? I always try to hang out with younger people!

Lesson #4: “Touch the future” and bless the next generation.

My focus on young people is why I didn’t know the prophetess Anna well. I am a septuagenarian. And Anna was an octogenarian! But that old lady became what you now call a “social influencer!”

¹⁰ Psalm 71:18

The Bible says Anna “*did not depart from the temple*” but “*worshiped with fasting and prayer night and day.*”¹¹ Although old and “*advanced in years,*” Anna did not stop “*giving thanks to God and speaking of Jesus to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem.*” So, when you are an old person like me or Anna, you can still console, encourage, and influence younger people, by speaking to them about Jesus!

I enjoy watching young parents come to the Temple to present their covenant children to the LORD for the rite of Purification. Mary, Joseph, and the newborn Jesus brought me and Anna together that day. Anna and I not only touched, but we also held the Person and Promise of a New Creation from God in our arms.

Now I hear you talk about how you desire a more “fulfilling” life. What do you mean? How long does it take for you to be fulfilled? Do you know how many days God has appointed for you to live?

*“Man does not know his time ... the children of man are snared at an evil time, when it suddenly falls upon them.”*¹² Make every day fulfilling, because any day could be your last day on earth, your death day.

Let me tell you about true life fulfillment. It is when your heart’s desire is to experience how God’s promises all come true, both in this life and the next. It is when you share God’s promises with those who come after you. Fulfillment is to receive and embrace Jesus personally, as your own Savior. Fulfillment is when Jesus Christ is your spiritual legacy to share with others. Don’t forget: fulfillment is not found in your Plans, but in God’s Person, not only in this life, but for an ever-lasting life in God’s presence.

¹¹ Luke 2:36-38

¹² Ecclesiastes 9:12

God promised that I would not see death until I had seen the Messiah. On that one happy day at the Temple, I held Jesus in my arms. My whole life was fulfilled. God's promises to Israel and God's promise to save the whole world all came true, fulfilled in this baby. I saw and held God's Christ, Jesus the Messiah.

So I can now *depart* this life. In fact, "*now depart*" are the first words of my song of praise in the Latin Bible: "*Nunc Dimittis.*"

"LORD, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your Word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." ¹³



Rembrandt's "Simeon in the Temple" (1669) was his final painting. It was found unfinished, in his studio, the day after he died.

Of course, there is suffering in life. Mary was forewarned about the cross that her baby would endure to secure our salvation.

But when God reveals Jesus Christ to you, when God's ancient people received king David's greatest Son, when people from every nation and generation embrace Jesus by faith, then no matter your age, you can *Go — Leave*. Your life is fulfilled when God's promises are fulfilled!

¹³ Luke 2:29-32

