

Part 1 – The Beginning of the Promise

Christmas and the Fullness of Time

- Christmas is not simply a beautiful annual event with music, decorations, and family traditions; it is the turning point of history that reveals how God has been guiding all things toward the coming of his Son. The Bible is not a random collection of stories but one unified narrative with a clear direction that shows the sovereign hand of God at work, explaining where we come from, why we are here, and what our ultimate purpose is in his plan.
- The letter to the Galatians reminds believers that the central issue of the gospel is not only how we are saved but how we continue in salvation, not by works of the law but by grace through faith. Paul writes to churches struggling with Judaizers who insisted that salvation might begin as a gift but must be preserved by keeping parts of the Jewish law, which is a form of legalism that undermines the sufficiency of Christ's work and the freedom of the gospel.
- Paul locates the coming of Christ in the precise timing of God's plan, insisting that the incarnation happened at the exact moment God had sovereignly appointed in human history.
 - **Galatians 4:4–5:** *But when the fullness of time came, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, to redeem those under the Law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.*
- In this first session, we begin to trace how Christmas is already present in seed form in the Old Testament, starting with Genesis and moving through the books of Moses. We will see that God's way of relating to his creation and to his people reveals patterns, promises, and images that all anticipate the birth of Jesus and the fullness of time.

God Walking with His Creation

- The Bible presents God not only as the transcendent Creator but as the One who personally relates to his creatures and draws near to them in their daily life.
 - **Genesis 3:8:** *Then they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden.*



- The tragedy of the fall is that human beings who were made to live openly in God's presence now fear his voice and hide from him. Christmas will eventually answer this problem, because the birth of Jesus is God once again coming to dwell with his people, this time in the flesh, entering our world to restore the broken relationship.

Foreshadowing the Messiah in Genesis

- When God pronounces judgment after the fall, he includes a cryptic promise that becomes the first whisper of the gospel.
 - **Genesis 3:15:** *I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her offspring; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel.*
- At first, it might seem natural to expect this promised victory to come quickly through the immediate offspring of Adam and Eve, but the story shows how deeply sin has damaged the human line. Cain and Abel are born as the first sons of Adam and Eve, and instead of becoming the serpent-crushing seed, Cain becomes the first murderer by killing his righteous brother. Cain models faithlessness, showing that the fallen human race is bent toward sin and that the promised deliverer will not come through every branch of the family line.
- God provides another son to continue his purposes and to carry forward the line that will eventually lead to Christ.
 - **Genesis 4:25:** *Adam made love to his wife again, and she gave birth to a son and named him Seth, saying, "God has granted me another child in place of Abel, since Cain killed him."*

Noah and the Line of Shem

- As Genesis unfolds, human wickedness multiplies until sin saturates the earth and God determines to bring judgment through the flood. The story of Noah is almost like a "do-over" of creation, in which God wipes the slate clean and preserves one family as a fresh beginning for humanity.
- After the floodwaters subside and Noah begins to cultivate the renewed earth, the narrative shows that the human heart is still deeply flawed; even after judgment, sin remains.
 - **Genesis 9:21–27:** *He drank some of the wine and became drunk, and he uncovered himself inside his tent. Ham, the father of Canaan, saw his father's nakedness and told his two brothers outside. But Shem and Japheth took a garment and laid it across their shoulders and walked in*



backward and covered their father's nakedness; their faces were turned away so that they did not see their father's nakedness.

When Noah awoke from his wine and learned what his youngest son had done to him, he said, "Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants he shall be to his brothers." He also said, "Blessed be the Lord, the God of Shem; and let Canaan be his servant. May God enlarge Japheth, and let him dwell in the tents of Shem; and let Canaan be his servant."

- This episode is more than an awkward family story; it marks a division of lines similar to the earlier separation between Cain and Abel. Ham and his son Canaan, like Cain, become associated with curse and rebellion, while Shem becomes the line of blessing that will eventually lead to Israel and to the Messiah. The text also begins to explain how the land that will later be promised to Israel is taken from the Canaanites and given to Abraham's descendants.
- The "do over" of the flood does not solve the problem of sin. Still, it clarifies that God is intentionally preserving a particular family line—through Seth and then Shem—through which his saving purposes will unfold. Already, we see that the coming of the Messiah will be rooted in a carefully chosen lineage rather than in humanity as a whole.

God's Covenant with Abraham

- After tracing the line of blessing through Seth and Shem, the narrative slows down to focus on one man whom God calls out of his homeland to begin a new nation.
 - **Genesis 12:1–3:** *The Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country, and from your relatives and your father's household, to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth will be blessed."*
- This covenant reveals that God's plan is both particular and global: he will work through one man and one family to bring blessing to all the nations. The promises to Abraham are the first clear statement of God's intention to build a people through whom he will ultimately bring salvation to the world, and Christmas will be the moment when that global blessing arrives in the person of Jesus.
- Yet the story also emphasizes that God's timing stretches human patience. Abram and Sarai are already advanced in years when the promise is given, and they remain childless for a long time afterward, which creates a crisis of faith.



- In their impatience, Abraham and Sarah try to help God fulfill his promise in their own way. Sarah gives her maidservant Hagar to Abraham, and Hagar bears Ishmael, which seems like a plausible solution to their childlessness. But God makes it clear that the covenant line will not come through human schemes but through his miraculous provision.
- God clarifies his plan and insists that the promised offspring will continue through Isaac rather than Ishmael.
 - **Genesis 21:12–13:** *But God said to Abraham, “Do not be distressed because of the boy and your slave woman. Listen to everything Sarah tells you, for through Isaac your offspring shall be named. And I will also make a nation of the son of the slave woman, because he is your descendant.”*
- The pattern is becoming clear: as with Cain and Seth, Ham and Shem, now Ishmael and Isaac are separated into lines of promise and lines outside the covenant. God is narrowing the line through which he will one day bring the Messiah, and the events of Abraham’s family are already foreshadowing Christmas.

Isaac, Jacob, and Judah

- The miraculous birth of Isaac to an elderly couple reinforces that God’s plan depends on his power, not human strength. As the story continues, Isaac and Rebekah also face difficulty in having children, which sets the stage for another crucial choice in the line of promise.
- God speaks to Rebekah while the twins struggle within her womb and reveals how their destinies will unfold.
 - **Genesis 25:23–26:** *The Lord said to her, “Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples will be separated from your body; one people shall be stronger than the other, and the older shall serve the younger.” When her days to give birth were completed, behold, there were twins in her womb. The first came out red, all over like a hairy garment, and they named him Esau. Afterward, his brother came out with his hand grasping Esau’s heel, so he was named Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when she gave birth to them.*
- God chooses Jacob rather than Esau as the carrier of the covenant line, once again overturning human expectations by favoring the younger rather than the older. The promise will move forward through Jacob and his descendants, sharpening the focus on the family from whom the Messiah will come.



- Late in his life, Jacob blesses his sons and speaks a particularly significant word over Judah, the fourth son of Leah, that points directly toward kingship and rule.
 - **Genesis 49:8–10:** *Judah, your brothers shall praise you; your hand will be on the neck of your enemies; your father's sons shall bow down to you. Judah is a lion's cub; from the prey, my son, you have gone up. He crouches, he lies down like a lion, and like a lioness—who dares to rouse him? The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until Shiloh comes; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples.*
- This blessing identifies Judah as the royal tribe from which kings will come, and it hints that a future ruler from Judah will receive the obedience of the nations. This is a clear foreshadowing of Jesus, the Lion of Judah, whose kingdom will be global and whose reign will draw the nations to himself.

Moses, Passover, and the Presence of God

- Centuries later, Abraham's descendants find themselves enslaved in Egypt, and God raises up Moses to deliver them and bring them toward the promised land. The climactic event of that deliverance is the Passover, which introduces crucial themes of substitution and salvation by blood.
- On the night of the final plague, Moses instructs the elders of Israel about the lamb that must be slain and the blood that must be applied for protection.
 - **Exodus 12:21–27:** Then Moses called for all the elders of Israel and said to them, “Go and select lambs for yourselves according to your families, and slaughter the Passover lamb. Take a bunch of hyssop, dip it in the blood in the basin, and apply some of that blood to the top and the two doorposts. None of you shall go outside the door of his house until morning. For the Lord will pass through to strike the Egyptians, and when he sees the blood on the top and the two doorposts, the Lord will pass over the doorway, and he will not permit the destroyer to enter your houses to strike you. And you shall observe this event as a statute for you and your sons forever. When you enter the land which the Lord will give you, as he promised, you shall observe this ceremony. And when your children say to you, ‘What does this ceremony mean to you?’ then you shall say, ‘It is the sacrifice of the Lord's Passover, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt when he struck the Egyptians but spared our homes.’” And the people bowed down and worshiped.



- The Passover teaches Israel that they are saved not by their own strength or merit but by the blood of a substitute that dies in their place. The lamb's blood marks their homes so that judgment "passes over" them, and this image will later be fulfilled in Jesus, the true Passover Lamb whose blood saves his people from sin and death.
- After the exodus, God's presence continues to accompany his people as they journey through the wilderness.
 - **Exodus 40:34–38:** *Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud had settled on it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. Throughout all their journeys, whenever the cloud was lifted from above the tabernacle, the Israelites would set out; but if the cloud was not lifted, then they did not set out until the day it was lifted. For the cloud of the Lord was over the tabernacle by day, and fire was in the cloud by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel during all their journeys.*
- The tabernacle and the visible pillar of cloud and fire show that God chooses to dwell in the midst of his people and to lead them in a way they can see. This anticipates the incarnation, when God will not only dwell in a tent or temple but will come as a person, Emmanuel, God with us, who walks among his people in human flesh.

Atonement and the Coming Prophet

- The sacrificial system given in Leviticus further develops the themes of sin, substitution, and atonement, culminating in the annual Day of Atonement.
 - **Leviticus 16:32–34:** *The priest who is anointed and ordained to serve as priest in his father's place shall make atonement. He shall put on the linen garments, the holy garments, and make atonement for the most holy place, for the tent of meeting and for the altar, and he shall make atonement for the priests and for all the people of the assembly. This shall be a permanent statute for you, to make atonement for the Israelites for all their sins once a year. And just as the Lord commanded Moses, so he did.*
- The Day of Atonement shows that a single representative, the high priest, can act on behalf of the whole community to secure forgiveness through sacrifice. This points forward to Jesus, the great High Priest, whose once-for-all sacrifice brings complete and lasting atonement for his people.
- At the same time, Israel is reminded that hearing God's voice directly is overwhelming and dangerous for sinful people, and that they need a mediator to speak God's word to them.



- **Deuteronomy 18:15–16:** *The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your fellow Israelites; you must listen to him. This is what you asked of the Lord your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said, “Let me not hear the voice of the Lord my God again or see this great fire anymore, or I will die.”*
- Deuteronomy’s promise of a coming prophet anticipates a future figure who will both reveal God’s word and stand as mediator between God and the people. The New Testament identifies Jesus as the ultimate prophet like Moses, who speaks God’s word perfectly and bridges the gap between a holy God and sinful humanity.

Summary from the Books of Moses

- When we step back from Genesis through Deuteronomy, we see that these books introduce a network of threads that all converge in Jesus and in the story of Christmas. There is a promise of someone from the woman’s offspring who will crush the serpent, a protected lineage that runs through Seth and Shem, and a covenant people formed through Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.
- The line of promise narrows through Isaac rather than Ishmael and through Jacob rather than Esau, and it is tied to Judah as the tribe from which a king will arise who will rule the nations. The stories of Abraham and Isaac introduce the pattern of substitutionary sacrifice, where a ram dies in the place of the beloved son, and the Passover lamb and the Day of Atonement deepen the themes of sacrificial blood and representative atonement.
- The exodus and the tabernacle emphasize that God desires to dwell among his people and to lead them. At the same time, Deuteronomy promises a coming prophet who will speak God’s word and mediate his presence. Together, these elements—offspring, lineage, covenant, kingship, sacrifice, atonement, presence, and prophecy—anticipate the person and work of Christ.

Christmas and the Fullness of Time

- Paul’s statement that Christ came in the fullness of time means that the birth of Jesus is the culmination of everything God had been doing from creation onward.
 - **Galatians 4:4–5:** *But when the fullness of time came, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, to redeem those under the Law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.*
- Christmas is therefore not an isolated sentimental story but the fulfillment of all human history and all redemptive history. The books of Moses give us glimpses of the coming Messiah in the



line of the woman, the blessed lineage of Seth and Shem, the covenant with Abraham, the testing of Isaac, the choice of Jacob, the kingship promised to Judah, the Passover lamb, the tabernacle presence, the Day of Atonement, and the promise of a coming prophet.

- We celebrate Christmas because Christ is worthy of worship as the One in whom all these promises and patterns are fulfilled. As we see how God has guided history toward the birth of his Son, we can trust that he also holds our lives in his hands and that our story finds its true meaning in his larger story.



Part 2 – Waiting in the Dark

What Led to Christ's Coming?

- In this session, we ask what events in Scripture led to the coming of Christ and therefore to Christmas, recognizing that the birth of Jesus is not an isolated miracle but the culmination of a long-prepared plan in history. The apostle Paul insists that Jesus did not appear at a random moment. Still, at the exact time God had appointed, which he calls the “fullness of time,” meaning that the conditions of world history and the story of God’s people had reached the point God had designed for his Son to come and for the gospel to spread.
 - **Galatians 4:4–5:** *But when the fullness of time came, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, to redeem those under the Law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.*
- The goal of this message is to search the Old Testament for clues about that fullness of time, asking how the story from Joshua through the kings and prophets prepares the way for the birth of Jesus. We are not trying to pretend that Old Testament believers could see all the details of Christmas in advance. Still, instead, like Paul, we are looking back from the vantage point of Christ’s death and resurrection and seeing how earlier events foreshadow and anticipate him.

The Road to Emmaus

- To understand why it is appropriate to read the Old Testament as anticipating Christ, we turn to the famous Easter story of the road to Emmaus, where the risen Jesus himself explains the Scriptures to two discouraged disciples. These two followers are walking away from Jerusalem, talking about the crucifixion and their shattered hopes, convinced that Jesus’ death meant the failure of their expectation that he would redeem Israel and that everything is now over.
 - **Luke 24:17–27:** *And he said to them, “What are these words that you are exchanging with one another as you are walking?” And they stood still, looking sad. One of them, named Cleopas, answered and said to him, “Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?” And he said to them, “What things?”*

And they said to him, “The things about Jesus the Nazarene, who was a prophet powerful in word and deed before God and all the people, and how the chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him. But we were hoping that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. Indeed, besides all this, it is now the third day since these



things happened. But also some women among us amazed us. When they were at the tomb early in the morning, and did not find his body, they came saying that they had also seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. And some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see."

And he said to them, "O foolish men and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and to enter into his glory?" Then beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them the things written about himself in all the Scriptures.

- Jesus models the very kind of reading we are doing: he starts with the Books of Moses and moves through all the prophets, showing how the entire Old Testament points to his suffering, death, and glory. This means that the story of Christmas and the cross was not an afterthought but was embedded in the Scriptures from the beginning, and our task is to trace some of those lines that Jesus would have unpacked on that road to Emmaus.
- Paul follows the same pattern in his letters, reading Old Testament events as previews and examples that find their fulfillment in Christ. One key example comes from his reflection on Israel's wilderness wanderings.
 - **1 Corinthians 10:1–4:** *For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. They all ate the same spiritual food and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they were drinking from a spiritual rock which followed them, and the rock was Christ.*
- Paul is not denying the historical details of the exodus. Still, he shows that beneath the visible events, there was a deeper spiritual reality: Christ himself was present with Israel, sustaining and leading them. This reinforces our approach in this series, in which we look back through the Old Testament to see how Christ was foreshadowed long before his birth in Bethlehem.

What We Have Seen So Far

- We have moved from Genesis to Deuteronomy and asked how God relates to his creation and to his people, discovering that the Books of Moses already contain a network of themes that point toward Christ. We saw that someone from the woman's offspring would one day crush the serpent, that the promise line ran through Seth and Shem, that Abraham was chosen to be the



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father of a nation through whom all the families of the earth would be blessed, and that Isaac's near sacrifice introduced the idea of a substitutionary offering dying in the place of another.

- The story continued through Jacob and then through the tribe of Judah, which was promised kingship and rule over the nations. At the same time, the Passover lamb and the Day of Atonement introduced the twin themes of sacrificial blood and representative atonement for the whole people. Finally, Deuteronomy spoke of a prophet like Moses whom God would raise so that the people could hear his word without being destroyed by his holiness, all of which foreshadows the person and work of Jesus Christ, the true King, Priest, and Prophet.

Joshua and the Call to Exclusive Worship

- With Moses' death at the end of Deuteronomy, Joshua takes leadership and leads Israel into the promised land, and the book of Joshua tells the story of their battles to conquer the land of Canaan. For the most part, Joshua and his generation are faithful. Still, even in this victorious period, the people must be reminded that they live surrounded by nations with many rival gods and that loyalty to the Lord requires a decisive choice.
 - **Joshua 24:14–15:** *Now, therefore, fear the Lord and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods which your fathers served beyond the Euphrates River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. But if it is disagreeable in your sight to serve the Lord, then choose for yourselves today whom you will serve—whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.*
- Joshua's challenge takes place at Shechem, the very place where Abraham had once been promised the land, and it presses the people to reject the idols of their past and their neighbors. This call to exclusive devotion anticipates the later tension in Israel's history when kings and people will repeatedly turn from the Lord to worship the gods of the surrounding cultures, setting the stage for the darkness into which the light of Christmas will eventually shine.

Detestable Practices and the Spiral of the Judges

- To understand why God is so insistent that his people throw away other gods, it helps to know something about the deities that surrounded Israel in the ancient world. Abram had come from Ur where the people worshiped the moon god Sin or Nanna; in Egypt, Ra was honored as the sun god and the source of power and light; in Canaan, Baal was revered as the lord of storm, rain,



and fertility, the god of prosperity, and Asherah was honored as a goddess of fertility, sometimes depicted as the queen of the gods and associated with sacred poles or trees.

- Other deities included Marduk, the Babylonian god of the universe, similar in function to the Greek Zeus; Dagon, a grain or fish god of fertility for the Philistines; and Moloch, a Canaanite god associated with child sacrifice, whose worshipers believed that if they shed blood for him, he would shed blood for them in battle. These cults were not harmless religious preferences but were bound up with moral corruption, violence, and the exploitation of the vulnerable, and God describes the worship of such gods as spiritual adultery, a whoring after other gods.
- The book of Judges shows what happens when Israel fails to drive out the nations completely and begins to adopt their practices instead of remaining faithful to the Lord. Again and again, God graciously raises judges to rescue his people, but the people quickly turn back to their idols as soon as each judge dies, creating a downward spiral of sin and judgment.
 - **Judges 2:16–19:** *Then the Lord raised up judges who saved them out of the hands of those who plundered them. Yet they did not listen to their judges, for they prostituted themselves to other gods and bowed down to them. They quickly turned aside from the way in which their fathers had walked, who had obeyed the commandments of the Lord; they did not do as their fathers had done. When the Lord raised up judges for them, the Lord was with the judge and saved them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge, for the Lord had compassion because of their groaning under those who oppressed and afflicted them. But when the judge died, they would turn back and act more corruptly than their fathers, following other gods to serve them and bow down to them. They did not give up their practices or their stubborn ways.*
- The refrain of Judges is that in those days there was no king in Israel and everyone did what was right in his own eyes, capturing the chaos and moral confusion of a people who had rejected God as their true king. This dark cycle of idolatry, judgment, deliverance, and deeper rebellion forms the backdrop for the later longing for a righteous king and ultimately for the coming of Christ, who will break this spiral of evil and bring lasting peace and righteousness.

The Promise of an Eternal Throne

- Out of the era of the judges, God raises Samuel as the last judge and a prophet who will anoint Israel's first kings, Saul and then David. The people ask for a king so that they can be like the other nations, and although their motives are mixed, God uses the monarchy to further his redemptive plan, primarily through David, the man after God's own heart.



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- Through the prophet Nathan, God makes a covenant with David that becomes one of the central promises pointing to the Messiah's kingship.
 - **2 Samuel 7:11–13:** *The Lord declares to you that the Lord himself will establish a house for you. When your days are finished and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your descendant after you, who will come from your own body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.*
- In its immediate context, this refers to Solomon, who will build the temple, but the promise of an eternal throne stretches beyond any merely human king; it looks ahead to a descendant of David whose kingdom will never end. This covenant prepares us to recognize Jesus as the Son of David, whose reign is eternal and who fulfills the deepest hopes associated with the throne of David.
- After David and Solomon, however, the kingdom divides into the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah, and many of the kings who follow do not walk in the ways of the Lord. As the monarchy decays through idolatry and injustice, God raises prophets to confront the kings and call the people back to covenant faithfulness. It is in this dark period that some of the most essential messianic promises are given.

Ahaz, Isaiah, and the Promise of Immanuel

- One especially dark example is King Ahaz of Judah, who reigns in Jerusalem but does not follow the example of David, his ancestor. Instead of trusting the Lord, Ahaz embraces the pagan practices of the surrounding nations, including the horror of child sacrifice.
 - **2 Kings 16:2–3:** *Ahaz was twenty years old when he became king, and he reigned sixteen years in Jerusalem. He did not do what was right in the sight of the Lord his God, as his father David had done. Instead, he walked in the ways of the kings of Israel and even sacrificed his son in the fire, following the detestable practices of the nations whom the Lord had driven out before the sons of Israel.*
- During Ahaz's reign, the political situation is tense because he faces threats from two northern kings, and he is too wicked and fearful to seek the Lord for help. In this context, God sends the prophet Isaiah to confront Ahaz and to offer him a sign of God's presence and deliverance, even though Ahaz is not interested in trusting God.
 - **Isaiah 7:11–14:** *Ask a sign for yourself from the Lord your God, make it deep as Sheol or high as heaven. But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test. Then he said, Hear now, O house of David. Is it too little for you to try the patience of men that you will*



try the patience of my God as well? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call his name Immanuel.

- Isaiah's prophecy has an immediate meaning in Ahaz's day, promising that within the time it takes for this child to grow up, the two threatening kings will be dealt with and Judah will be delivered. Yet the name Immanuel, meaning "God with us," and the language of a child as a divine sign open up a deeper horizon that will eventually be fulfilled in the birth of Jesus, when God himself comes into the story not as a distant deity to be chased, but as the One who pursues his people in grace.
- The Hebrew word translated "young woman" in Isaiah has a wide range of meanings. It can refer to a young woman of marriageable age, who may or may not be a virgin, which fits the immediate historical situation. When Matthew later quotes this prophecy to describe the birth of Jesus, he uses the Greek word for "virgin," which has a narrower meaning and makes clear that Mary's conception by the Holy Spirit is a unique and miraculous fulfillment of Isaiah's sign.
 - Matthew 1:22–23
Paraphrase: Matthew explains that all this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: the virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel, which means "God with us."
- In Jesus, the sign to Ahaz becomes a greater sign to the whole world, because the child born of the virgin is not only a symbol of God's help but is truly the Son of God come in the flesh. Christmas is therefore the story of God writing himself into our story, not waiting for us to climb up to him by religious effort, but stepping down into our darkness to be with us and to save us.

Light in the Darkness

- Isaiah goes on to describe the people of his day as walking in deep darkness, oppressed by sin, injustice, and foreign powers, yet he also prophesies that a great light will dawn upon them. This language captures both the spiritual condition of Israel in Isaiah's time and the hope that God will send a deliverer who brings joy, freedom, and peace.
 - **Isaiah 9:2:** *The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness, on them the light has shone.*
- In its original setting, this promise encouraged a people surrounded by war, idolatry, and fear that God had not abandoned them, and that he would act to save and restore them. When we read this passage in light of the New Testament, we recognize that the dawning light is Christ himself,



whose coming breaks the long darkness of sin and exile and extends hope not only to Israel but to all nations.

- The darkness Isaiah describes is not foreign to our world; we, too, live in cultures that chase idols of power, prosperity, and pleasure, and we see the same patterns of injustice and rebellion that plagued Israel. The relevance of Christmas is that the light Isaiah promised has already come in Jesus, and we are invited to step into that light, to trust the God who comes to be with us, and to live as people of hope in a world that still feels very dark.

Christmas and the Fullness of Time – Drawing the Threads Together

- When Paul speaks of Christ coming in the fullness of time, he is summarizing the entire story we have been tracing: a story of God choosing a people, tolerating their failures, disciplining and rescuing them, establishing covenants with Abraham and David, sending judges and kings and prophets, and speaking promises of a child and a king who would one day bring light into darkness. The period from Joshua through the kings and prophets reveals both the depth of human sin and God's determination to keep his promises and bring salvation through a coming Messiah.
- The events we have examined in this message—Joshua's call to exclusive worship, the idolatry of the judges, the covenant with David, the wickedness of Ahaz, the sign of Immanuel, and the promise of a great light—all move the story forward toward Bethlehem. Christmas is not simply a sentimental season; it is the moment when God's long, carefully prepared plan reaches its turning point, and the eternal Son steps into history as the light of the world.
- As we continue in this series and move from prophecy to fulfillment, we are invited to see Jesus as the answer to the darkness that runs through every page of the Old Testament and through every human heart. The more we understand the setting and the promises, the more deeply we will appreciate the wonder of the manger and the glory of the King who came to be God with us.



Part 3 – A Sign from Heaven

The Set Time for God's Son

- In this message, we continue exploring how the Old Testament anticipates the coming of Christ, asking what had to happen in history and in Israel's story before God sent his Son. Paul's language in Galatians shows that the birth of Jesus took place at a particular moment God had ordained, which he calls the "set time" or "fullness of time," reminding us that Christmas is not random or accidental but the result of an extended and carefully prepared plan.
 - **Galatians 4:4–5:** *But when the fullness of time came, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, to redeem those under the Law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.*
- Paul emphasizes that the Son of God came as one "born of a woman" and "born under the law," so that he could redeem those under the law and bring them into the status of sons and daughters. The incarnation, therefore, is not a sentimental story for one night of the year but the central turning point of God's saving work, when he steps into our world in the fullness of time to accomplish redemption.
- To understand why this particular time was "full," we look back into Israel's darkest days when God offered a sign to a faithless king, a sign that would later be fulfilled in the birth of Jesus. That sign is rooted in the prophecy of Isaiah, given in a moment of fear, political pressure, and spiritual compromise, and it points forward to God's ultimate act of drawing near to his people.

The Need for a Sign

- King Ahaz of Judah ruled in Jerusalem during a period of intense political threat and deep spiritual corruption. He was terrified of two kings to the north who threatened his kingdom. Instead of trusting the Lord, he had already begun to imitate the detestable practices of the surrounding nations, including the worship of foreign gods and even child sacrifice.
- The crisis in Ahaz's time was not just military but spiritual: the king of the house of David, who was supposed to trust God and lead the people in faithful obedience, was instead turning to human schemes and pagan worship. In this setting, God graciously sent the prophet Isaiah to confront Ahaz and to offer him a sign from heaven, even though Ahaz did not deserve it and did not really want to trust the Lord.



- Through Isaiah, God invited Ahaz to ask for any sign, whether as deep as the depths or as high as the heights, as a way to strengthen his faith and call him back to dependence on God. Ahaz refused under a cloak of false piety, pretending he did not want to test the Lord, when in reality he did not want to abandon his own political plans; so Isaiah announced that God himself would choose and give the sign.

The Promise of Immanuel

- Isaiah's confrontation with Ahaz culminates in one of the most famous prophecies in Scripture, which offers a sign that involves a child and a name that declares God's presence with his people.
 - **Isaiah 7:11–14:** *Ask a sign for yourself from the Lord your God, make it deep as Sheol or high as heaven. But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test. Then he said, Hear now, O house of David. Is it too little for you to try the patience of men that you will try the patience of my God as well? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call his name Immanuel.*
- Isaiah first tells Ahaz to ask the Lord for a sign “as deep as the depths or as high as the heights,” making it clear that nothing is too great for God to do to confirm his word. When Ahaz refuses, Isaiah rebukes the whole house of David for trying the patience of God and then declares that the Lord himself will give the sign: a young woman will conceive and bear a son and will call his name Immanuel, which means “God with us.”
- In the immediate historical context, this prophecy assured Ahaz that before this child reached a certain age, the two kings he feared would be defeated and their lands laid waste. The sign, therefore, had a near fulfillment in Isaiah's own time, showing that God was still in control of history and could deliver Judah from its enemies even when the king refused to trust him.
- The Hebrew term used for “young woman” in this passage is flexible enough to refer to an ordinary child in Isaiah's day. At the same time, the more profound significance of the sign, especially the name Immanuel and the emphasis on God's presence, points beyond the immediate situation to a greater fulfillment that will only become clear in the New Testament.
- The heart of the sign is that God himself will be with his people in the midst of their darkness and fear. Rather than remaining distant and demanding that people climb up to him, the Lord declares his intention to enter into human history, to stand alongside his people in their distress, and to bring salvation from within their story.



Light in the Darkness

- Isaiah does not stop with the prophecy of the child called Immanuel; in the following chapters, he offers a sweeping vision of light breaking into darkness, which gives a broader framework for understanding what the sign means. He describes the people of Israel as walking in deep darkness, burdened by oppression, sin, and fear, yet he proclaims that a great light will dawn upon them.
 - **Isaiah 9:2:** *The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness, on them the light has shone.*
 - The image is vivid: people living in a land of deep shadow suddenly see a great light shining upon them, signaling joy, deliverance, and the end of their oppression. Isaiah's language about darkness and light captures both the political turmoil of his day and the more profound spiritual blindness that plagued God's people, and it anticipates a future intervention by God that will change everything.
 - This same section of Isaiah goes on to describe a child who will be born and a son who will be given, whose names and titles reveal his divine identity and his royal authority. This child will bear the government on his shoulders, and his reign will be characterized by justice, righteousness, and endless peace on the throne of David, all accomplished by the zeal of the Lord.
 - **Isaiah 9:6–7:** *For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will rest on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on the throne of David and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will accomplish this.*
 - Together, the prophecies of Isaiah 7 and 9 paint a picture of a coming child whose birth will be a sign of God's presence, whose life will bring light into darkness, and whose rule will fulfill the promises made to David. While Isaiah's hearers could not see all the details, these prophecies created a sense of expectation that God would one day act decisively and personally to save his people and establish a righteous kingdom.
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The Righteous Branch from David's Line

- Isaiah is not the only prophet to speak of a coming king from David's line; Jeremiah also prophesies about a future ruler who will reign wisely and bring salvation and safety to God's



people. In Jeremiah's day, many of the Davidic kings were corrupt, unjust, and idolatrous, and the nation suffered under their poor leadership and under foreign threats, so God promised to raise a different kind of king.

- **Jeremiah 23:5–6:** *The days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he will reign as king and act wisely and do what is just and right in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called: The Lord Our Righteousness.*
- Jeremiah announces that the days are coming when God will raise for David a righteous Branch, a king who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. In his days, Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell in safety, and this king will bear a name that connects him directly with the Lord's saving righteousness.
- This promise responds to the failure of the kings like Ahaz by pointing forward to a descendant of David who will finally live up to the calling of the Davidic covenant. The righteous Branch will embody God's justice, bring real salvation and security to his people, and bear a name that reflects the Lord's own character, all of which prepares us to recognize Jesus as the true and faithful King.
- When we set Jeremiah's promise alongside Isaiah's sign of Immanuel and vision of light in the darkness, we see converging lines of expectation: a child who will be a sign of God's presence, a light that dispels darkness, and a righteous king from David's line who brings salvation and peace. These prophetic strands are like threads woven into the fabric of Israel's hope, waiting to be tied together in the coming of Christ.

The Virgin Birth and "God With Us"

- The Gospel of Matthew opens by presenting Jesus as the son of David and the son of Abraham, anchoring him firmly in the promises and covenants of the Old Testament, and then immediately moves to tell the story of his birth. In Matthew's account, Joseph discovers that Mary is pregnant before they come together as husband and wife, and he plans to divorce her quietly until an angel appears in a dream and explains that the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.
- Matthew then pauses to explain to his readers that this miraculous conception by the Holy Spirit is not an isolated wonder but the fulfillment of Isaiah's ancient prophecy.



- **Matthew 1:22–23:** *All this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: Behold, the virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel, which means God with us.*
- Matthew explicitly connects the birth of Jesus to Isaiah's sign, quoting the prophecy that the virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and that they will call him Immanuel, which, he explains, means "God with us." In moving from the Hebrew term for "young woman" with a broad range of meaning to the Greek word that clearly means "virgin," Matthew shows that the ultimate fulfillment of the prophecy involves a truly miraculous conception and a uniquely holy child.
- In Jesus, the sign given to Ahaz is filled out in a way that goes far beyond anything Isaiah's generation could have imagined. The child born of Mary is not merely a symbol of God's help but is, in his very person, God come to dwell with his people, fully divine and fully human, entering into their darkness to bring light and salvation.
- Matthew's use of Isaiah's prophecy confirms that reading the Old Testament as a preparation for Christ is not something we are imposing on the text. Still, it is the way the New Testament itself teaches us to read Scripture. The birth of Jesus is the moment when all of these prophetic signposts—Immanuel, the great light, the righteous Branch, the eternal Davidic king—come together in a single person, revealing the fullness of God's plan.

God Writes Himself into the Story

- When we put all these elements together, we see that Christmas is the story of God writing himself into our story, not waiting for us to find our way to him through religious effort or moral improvement. The sign of Immanuel in Isaiah's day showed that God cared enough about his unfaithful people to assure them of his presence; the ultimate fulfillment in Jesus shows that God cares enough to enter our world personally, to take on flesh, and to bear our sin and shame.
- The darkness Isaiah described is not only the darkness of the eighth century before Christ but the darkness of every age in which people chase other gods, ignore the Lord, and live in fear and confusion. The good news of Christmas is that the great light has already dawned in Jesus, and that the eternal and global King has come to rule with justice and righteousness and to offer salvation to all who trust in him.
- For believers today, the sign of Immanuel is both a historical fulfillment and a present comfort: the same God who came to be with his people in Bethlehem still promises to be with us by his Spirit. As we walk through our own seasons of uncertainty and fear, we can remember that God



has already stepped into our world, kept his promises, and given us his Son. We can live in the assurance that he is still with us and will bring his good purposes to completion in the fullness of his time.



Part 4 – The Silence is Broken

When God Seems Silent

- In this message, you step back from Jesus' adult ministry to look at how the New Testament story begins, not with Bethlehem or Nazareth, but with a faithful elderly couple and a long period of divine silence. After centuries of prophetic voices in the Old Testament, God stopped raising prophets after Malachi. For more than four hundred years, there was no new word from the Lord, no fresh revelation, and no clear sign of when his promises would finally be fulfilled.
- During those long years between the Old and New Testaments, Israel shrank from a twelve-tribe kingdom to a small remnant. It was repeatedly dominated by foreign powers, shifting from Persian rule to Greek rule and finally to Roman rule. The people of God felt small, oppressed, and insignificant, and although some still clung to God's promises of a Messiah, they had no idea when or how those promises would come to pass, and it was easy to wonder whether God had forgotten them.
- Luke writes his Gospel so that his reader, Theophilus, might know the certainty of the things he has been taught, and he begins not with the birth of Jesus, but with an announcement to a priest named Zechariah. This opening story shows that the God who seemed silent is still faithful, that he has been guiding history all along, and that he is about to break the silence in a way that prepares the world for the coming of his Son.

Herod, the Priesthood, and a Childless Couple

- Luke situates his narrative "in the time of Herod, king of Judea," a ruler who reigned from 37 BC to 4 BC and was known as a shrewd politician, a brilliant builder, and an unspeakably cruel man. Herod held the self-appointed title "King of the Jews," yet he was an Idumean from the line of Esau rather than Jacob, which made him a constant reminder that Israel was still under foreign rule and lacked a true son of David on the throne (Luke 1:5).
- Within this oppressive context, Luke introduces Zechariah, whose name means "God remembers," and his wife Elizabeth, whose name means "God is my oath." Zechariah is a priest from the tribe of Levi and the line of Aaron, and he is married to a priest's daughter, which means that both his heritage and his marriage reflect a deep connection to the priestly calling (Luke 1:5–6).



- The priesthood at this time was organized into twenty-four divisions or courses, each tied back to arrangements made in the time of David. 1 Chronicles 24:7–19 is the source for the “course of Abijah,” which was the eighth of the twenty-four divisions to which Zechariah belonged.
 - Each division contained multiple priestly families, and because there were thousands of priests in total, each division only served in the temple for one week every six months, plus all divisions came together for the major festivals (Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles).
- Priests were expected to live holy lives and were restricted in whom they could marry, because they represented the people before God and were set apart for his service.
 - **Leviticus 21:7:** *They shall not marry a prostitute or a woman who has been defiled, nor shall they marry a woman divorced from her husband, for the priest is holy to his God.*
- Luke describes Zechariah and Elizabeth as “righteous in the sight of God,” walking blamelessly in all the Lord’s commands and decrees. Yet, he also notes that they are childless because Elizabeth is unable to conceive and both of them are very old (Luke 1:6–7). Children were viewed as a sign of God’s blessing and favor, so their barrenness would have felt like a deep personal grief and, in that culture, could be misread by others as a sign of God’s displeasure.
 - **Deuteronomy 7:14:** *You will be blessed more than all the peoples; none among you will be childless, neither male nor female, nor among your livestock.*
 - **Psalms 127:3–5:** *Children are a heritage from the Lord, offspring a reward from him. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are children born in one’s youth. Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them. They will not be put to shame when they contend with their enemies at the gate.*
 - **Psalms 128:3–4:** *Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house; your children will be like olive shoots around your table. Behold, thus shall the man be blessed who fears the Lord.*
- The Old Testament repeatedly shows that childlessness can be an arena for God’s special grace and power, as he gives miracle births that advance his purposes. Zechariah and Elizabeth stand in a long line of couples for whom God intervened: Abraham and Sarah with Isaac, Isaac and Rebekah with Esau and Jacob, Jacob and Rachel with Joseph and Benjamin, Manoah and his barren wife with Samson, and Elkanah and Hannah with Samuel. Their story prepares us to see that God is about to act again in a similar way, this time at the very beginning of the New Testament era.



Zechariah Chosen by Lot

- Luke goes on to describe how Zechariah, as part of his division's turn in the temple, is chosen by lot to offer incense in the holy place, a privilege that most priests would never experience in their entire lifetime (Luke 1:8–9). The burning of incense on the altar in front of the veil was part of the daily morning and evening sacrifices, but only one priest at a time could enter the holy place to perform this duty, and once a priest had done it, he was never chosen again.
- Casting lots was not treated as random chance but as a means of discerning God's will, and so Zechariah's selection is a sign of divine providence rather than good luck.
 - **Proverbs 16:33:** *The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.*
- The temple building itself consisted of two rooms: the holy place, which made up the front two-thirds of the structure, and the holy of holies, separated by a curtain and entered only once a year by the high priest on the Day of Atonement. Zechariah would never have gone into the holy of holies. Still, on this special day, he enters the holy place to tend the golden lampstand, prepare the incense, and place it on the altar so that its fragrance rises before the Lord as the people pray outside.
- The burning of incense is repeatedly compared to prayer in Scripture, so that the smoke rising before God becomes a visual symbol of the people's prayers ascending to heaven.
 - **Psalms 141:2:** *May my prayer be counted as incense before you, the lifting up of my hands as the evening offering.*
- According to Jewish tradition, the officiating priest in Zechariah's position would offer thanksgiving for blessings received and would pray for the peace and salvation of Israel. On this particular day, as he performs this solemn act in profound silence, he is likely praying for God to deliver his people from Roman oppression and to fulfill his ancient promises of redemption, even as his own personal story of childlessness hangs over him.

An Angel in the Temple

- While Zechariah is offering incense at the altar, an angel of the Lord appears to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense, and Zechariah is understandably gripped with fear (Luke 1:11–12). Angelic appearances in the temple or tabernacle are sporadic in Scripture and often associated with judgment, so Zechariah would have every reason to be terrified that something had gone terribly wrong.



- The angel, however, immediately tells him not to be afraid and explains that his prayer has been heard: Elizabeth will bear him a son and he is to call the child's name John (Luke 1:13). The announcement simultaneously answers Zechariah's long-held personal desire for a child and the more profound national longing for God to act, because this son will have a unique role in preparing the way for the Lord.
- The angel declares that John will be a joy and delight to his parents and that many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is not to drink wine or other fermented drink, not as a Nazirite vow in the technical sense of Numbers 6:1–21, but as an outward sign that he is set apart for God and will find his satisfaction and empowerment in the Holy Spirit rather than in earthly pleasures.
- Unlike most people in the Old Testament, who experienced the Spirit's presence only intermittently and for specific tasks, John will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from his mother's womb. That detail underscores the extraordinary nature of his calling: he will be equipped from the very beginning by God's own power to carry out the mission of turning many Israelites back to the Lord and preparing them for the coming Messiah.

In the Spirit and Power of Elijah

- The angel's description of John's ministry consciously echoes Old Testament expectations about a coming prophetic figure in the line of Elijah who would turn people's hearts back to God. John will go before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah, turning the hearts of parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord (Luke 1:16–17).
- These phrases directly connect John's role to several prophecies in Malachi that describe how God would send a messenger and an Elijah-like prophet before the great day of the Lord.
 - **Malachi 2:6–7:** *True instruction was in his mouth, and no wrong was found on his lips. He walked with me in peace and uprightness, and he turned many from iniquity. For the lips of a priest should preserve knowledge, and people should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts.*
 - **Malachi 3:1:** *Behold, I am going to send my messenger, and he will clear the way before me. Then the Lord you are seeking will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts.*



- **Malachi 4:5–6:** *Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, so that I will not come and strike the land with complete destruction.*
- Malachi foretells that God will send a messenger to prepare the way before him and that the Lord whom the people seek will suddenly come to his temple, which is precisely what begins to unfold when the angel appears to Zechariah while he serves in the temple. Malachi also promises that God will send Elijah before the great and dreadful day of the Lord, and that this figure will turn the hearts of parents to their children and children to their parents, restoring relationships and calling people to repentance so that the land will not be struck with destruction.
- By tying John's mission to these texts, the angel reveals that the long-awaited forerunner has arrived and that God is about to speak again to his people after four hundred years of silence. John's ministry will be a call to repent, confess sin, and return to the Lord, which is how people are to "get ready" for the coming of Christ.

A Sign of Unbelief

- Despite the honor of his role, the clarity of the angel's message, and the scriptural promises it fulfills, Zechariah struggles to believe what he is hearing. He asks how he can be sure of this, pointing out that he is an old man and his wife is well along in years, which is a polite way of saying that it is biologically impossible for them to have children at this stage of life (Luke 1:18).
- The angel identifies himself as Gabriel, the one who stands in the presence of God and has been sent to speak to Zechariah and bring him this good news. Because Zechariah did not believe Gabriel's words, even though the messenger came directly from God's presence, he was told that he would be silent and unable to speak until the day the child was born and the promise was fulfilled. His muteness becomes both a discipline for his unbelief and a sign to others that something extraordinary has happened in the temple (Luke 1:19–20).
- While Zechariah is inside experiencing this encounter, the worshipers outside are waiting for him to emerge and pronounce the customary priestly blessing that would conclude the service. When he finally comes out and cannot speak, they realize he has seen a vision, and his inability to give the blessing only heightens the sense that God has broken the silence in startling and mysterious ways (Luke 1:21–22).
 - **Numbers 6:24–26:** *The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace.*



- The blessing from Numbers 6, which asks the Lord to bless and keep his people, to make his face shine upon them and give them peace, is withheld on this day because the priest cannot speak. Ironically, the people do not hear the blessing they expect, but the event itself is a sign that the Lord is, in fact, about to shine his face upon them in a far greater way through the coming of John and then Jesus.

Elizabeth's Praise

- After his time of service is completed, Zechariah returns home, still unable to speak, and in due time Elizabeth becomes pregnant, just as the angel foretold (Luke 1:23–24). For five months, she remains in seclusion, reflecting on what God has done, and she responds with praise, saying that the Lord has done this for her, showing his favor and taking away her disgrace among the people.
- Elizabeth's words reveal both the personal and corporate dimensions of God's action: he has lifted the reproach of a barren woman in a culture that prized children, and he has signaled that he is once again at work to fulfill his promises to Israel. The birth of John will not only change their family's story but will also mark the beginning of the events that lead directly to the birth of Jesus and the fulfillment of the long-awaited hope.
- In giving John to Zechariah and Elizabeth, God demonstrates that his promises never fail, even when they seem delayed beyond human hope. The silence of four hundred years is broken first by an angel in the temple and then by the prophetic voice of John, calling people to repentance and preparing them to meet the Messiah; this, in turn, sets the stage for the birth of Christ and the complete revelation of God's salvation.

Waiting, Faithfulness, and Preparation

- This story teaches that God's apparent silence does not mean his absence or inactivity. At the same time, Israel endured foreign rule, and generations passed without new prophecy. God was still guiding history toward the moment when he would send both a forerunner and his Son. Zechariah and Elizabeth model a quiet, long-term faithfulness in a difficult age: they continue to walk blamelessly before the Lord, even when their nation is small and oppressed, and unmet desires mark their own lives.
- Zechariah's temporary unbelief is both understandable and instructive, because it shows how hard it can be to believe that God will finally act after years of disappointment. His enforced



silence becomes a living parable of the larger silence of God and the radical nature of what is beginning to happen: when God breaks the silence in Christ, he does so through a word that is greater than any prior revelation. This word calls for trust even when circumstances seem impossible.

- John's calling in the spirit and power of Elijah highlights that no one can truly receive Christ without first being summoned to repentance and a return to the Lord. As the forerunner who announces that it is time to "get ready," he embodies the truth that Christmas is not merely about sentiment but about hearts being prepared, sin being confessed. Lives are being realigned with the God who is about to come near.
- For believers today, this passage invites us to trust God's promises even when we feel like we are living between testaments, waiting for him to act in ways we cannot yet see. It reminds us that God often begins his most significant works in places that look small and insignificant, through people who have quietly remained faithful, and that when he breaks the silence, it is to call us back to himself and to prepare us to welcome his Son with repentance, gratitude, and worship.



Part 5 – The Humble Maiden and the Mighty God

A Desperate Setting for Christmas

- Modern Christmas often begins with carefully prepared settings: decorations, lights, music, food, family gatherings, gifts, and travel, all planned well in advance because we know the date and can build toward it. In the first century, however, the setting for the original Christmas felt desperate and bleak: Israel was only a fraction of what it once had been, grafted by force into the Roman Empire, ruled by an Idumean called Herod who had taken for himself the title “King of the Jews,” and still living under the weight of four hundred years of prophetic silence.
- The Old Testament had ended with Judah under Persian rule; between the Testaments came Greek rule, and now Rome dominated the land, reminding the people daily that they did not rule themselves. Some still believed God’s promises and longed for the Messiah. Still, after centuries of Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Greek, and Roman domination, it was difficult to know when or whether the promised king would truly come, and most people were not “getting ready” in any outward way for his arrival.
- In the previous message, the silence was broken privately when the angel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah in the temple, promising a son who would be a prophet in the spirit of Elijah and a forerunner who would call people back to God. That announcement fulfilled the final words of the last prophet, Malachi, who had foretold that God would send a messenger to prepare the way and a prophet like Elijah before the great day of the Lord.
 - **Malachi 3:1:** *Behold, I am going to send my messenger, and he will clear the way before me. Then the Lord you are seeking will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts.*
 - **Malachi 4:5–6:** *Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, so that I will not come and strike the land with complete destruction.*
- Luke now turns from the older priest in the temple to a young girl in an obscure village, showing that the same God who has just promised a prophet to an aging couple will also promise the Messiah himself to a humble maiden. Luke’s goal in 1:26–56 is to compare and contrast the births of John and Jesus: both are announced by Gabriel, both are miracle children, but only Jesus is the eternal King and Son of the Most High.



Gabriel Sent to Mary

- Six months after Elizabeth had conceived John, God sent the angel Gabriel again, this time not to Jerusalem or the temple but to a small town called Nazareth in the region of Galilee. Luke emphasizes that Gabriel is sent “to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David,” and that the virgin’s name is Mary; this introduction immediately sets up a striking contrast with Zechariah and Elizabeth, who were older, married, priestly, and living in the religious center of the nation.
 - **Luke 1:26–27:** *In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David, and the virgin’s name was Mary.*
- Mary is a young teenager, likely somewhere around twelve to fifteen years old, which was a typical age for betrothal in that culture. She has never been with a man sexually and is in the betrothal period, a legally binding engagement that usually lasts about a year; during this time, she is legally considered Joseph’s wife, but they do not yet live together or consummate the marriage, as Joseph works to pay the dowry and prepare a home for them.
- The custom of betrothal involved a formal agreement between families, often negotiated through mediators who would settle the terms and the dowry before any celebratory drink was shared. Once the agreement was reached and the cup was finally drunk, the couple was legally bound, and the groom would spend the betrothal period securing lodging and provisions. At the same time, the bride remained in her family home, waiting for the wedding and the start of daily married life.
- In this quiet, ordinary stage of her life, with nothing outwardly impressive about her village, status, or age, Mary is suddenly addressed by an angelic messenger from heaven, showing that God’s great saving work often begins in places that appear humble and insignificant by human standards.

Gabriel’s Message

- Gabriel greets Mary with words of grace and favor, telling her that she is highly favored and that the Lord is with her. Mary is greatly troubled by his greeting and wonders what kind of greeting this might be, because an angelic visitation in Scripture can signal both judgment and blessing. Yet, Gabriel reassures her not to be afraid, because she has found favor with God.



- **Luke 1:28–30:** *And coming in, he said to her, “Greetings, favored one, the Lord is with you.” But she was very perplexed at his statement and kept pondering what kind of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.”*
- Gabriel then delivers the heart of the announcement: Mary will conceive and give birth to a son, she is to give him the name Jesus, and this child will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, he will reign over Jacob’s descendants, and his kingdom will never end; Gabriel’s words gather up the strands of the old covenant promise and declare that they are now coming to fulfillment in Mary’s womb.
 - **Luke 1:31–33:** *And behold, you will conceive in your womb and give birth to a son, and you shall name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of his father David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and his kingdom will have no end.*
- Gabriel’s statement that the child will be “great” echoes the earlier description of John, who was promised to be great before the Lord, yet Jesus’ greatness is greater still, because he is not only a prophet but the very Son of the Most High. The phrase “Son of the Most High” is a messianic title, identifying Jesus with the highest and true God; interestingly, in the Gospels, the one explicit use of this exact title for Jesus comes from the lips of a demon in the story of the Gerasene demoniac.
 - **Mark 5:7:** *And shouting with a loud voice, he said, “What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you by God, do not torment me!”*
- Gabriel also promises that the Lord God will give this child “the throne of his father David,” linking Jesus to the covenant God made with David a thousand years earlier. In 2 Samuel 7, God promised David that a descendant from his line would build a house for the Lord’s name and that God would establish the throne of his kingdom forever, an eternal kingship that no merely human king had yet fulfilled.
 - **2 Samuel 7:13:** *He will build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.*
- By connecting Jesus to David’s throne and describing his kingdom as one that will never end, Gabriel reveals that Mary’s child is the long-promised Messianic King whose reign will be eternal. This is striking in a world where Herod, an Idumean from Esau’s line, sits as a false “king of the Jews”; through Mary’s son, God is about to restore the true Davidic kingship and inaugurate a kingdom that no empire will topple.



The Miracle of the Virgin Birth

- Mary responds to Gabriel not with disbelief but with an honest question: “How will this be, since I am a virgin?” Unlike Zechariah, who asked for proof that the promise would come to pass, Mary accepts that it will happen and asks about the manner, because she knows she has not been with a man, and the promise of a son, therefore, presents a real puzzle to her.
 - **Luke 1:34:** *Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?”*
- Gabriel explains that the Holy Spirit will come upon her and the power of the Most High will overshadow her; for that reason, the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. He gives Mary a sign to strengthen her faith by telling her that Elizabeth, her relative, is already six months pregnant in her old age, even though she was said to be unable to conceive, underscoring that nothing is impossible with God.
 - **Luke 1:35–37:** *The angel answered and said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; for that reason the holy child will be called the Son of God. And behold, even your relative Elizabeth has conceived a son in her old age, and she who was called barren is now in her sixth month. For nothing will be impossible with God.”*
- The explanation draws on the opening chapters of Genesis, where God created life from the dust of the ground and fashioned Eve from Adam’s rib; if God can create life out of dirt and bone, he can certainly make life in the womb of a virgin by the work of his Spirit. The sign of Elizabeth’s pregnancy reinforces this, because in Elizabeth God restores life where age and barrenness had made it humanly impossible. In Mary, he creates life where there has been no sexual union.
- Elizabeth is “too old,” perhaps old enough to be a grandmother, and her pregnancy reverses the hopelessness of long-term childlessness; Mary is “too young” and not yet married, and her conception without a husband challenges all normal expectations and invites misunderstanding. Yet Mary’s faith prevails over any fear of being labeled immoral or unfaithful, and she responds with remarkable trust, declaring herself the Lord’s servant and consenting to his word.
 - **Luke 1:38:** *And Mary said, “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; may it be done to me according to your word.” And the angel departed from her.*
- Mary, therefore, becomes a model of obedient faith: she receives a staggering promise that will complicate her life and reputation, yet she entrusts herself to God’s power and goodness. Her humble willingness to participate in God’s plan stands in contrast to Zechariah’s unbelief. It anticipates the humility and submission that will characterize her Son’s own obedience to the Father.



Confirmation and Joy

- In response to Gabriel's message and the sign he gives, Mary quickly leaves Nazareth and travels to the hill country of Judea to visit Elizabeth. The journey would likely have taken three to four days, and Mary's haste suggests both eagerness to see the sign fulfilled and a desire for the support of the older woman who is also experiencing a miraculous pregnancy.
 - **Luke 1:39–40:** *Now at that time Mary set out and went in a hurry to the hill country, to a town in Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.*
- When Mary greets Elizabeth, the baby in Elizabeth's womb (John) leaps, and Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit and cries out in a loud voice, blessing Mary. John, who is already filled with the Holy Spirit from the womb, begins even before his birth to testify to Jesus, and Elizabeth recognizes that the child Mary carries is her Lord, acknowledging that she is unworthy that the mother of her Lord should come to her.
 - **Luke 1:41–43:** *When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. And she cried out with a loud voice and said, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear. But why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?"*
- Elizabeth affirms that Mary is blessed because she has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her. This statement highlights the central reason for Mary's blessedness: not simply that she will bear the Messiah, but that she trusts God's word and submits to his plan, even when it will cost her socially and personally.
 - **Luke 1:45:** *Blessed is she who believed that what was spoken to her by the Lord would be fulfilled.*
- The meeting between Mary and Elizabeth is therefore a moment of confirmation, encouragement, and joy, in which God uses one woman's experience to strengthen the faith of the other. It also underscores Jesus' superiority to John: even in the womb, John responds to Jesus' presence, and Elizabeth, the mother of the forerunner, confesses that Mary's child is her Lord.



Mary's Song

- In response to Elizabeth's Spirit-filled blessing, Mary breaks into a song of praise that has come to be known as the Magnificat, from the Latin word for "magnify." Luke presents this song in Luke 1:46–55, and it is structured much like Hannah's song in 1 Samuel 2:1–10, in which another woman rejoiced in God's salvation after receiving the gift of a long-awaited child.
 - **Luke 1:46–49:** *And Mary said, "My soul exalts the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior, for he has looked on the humble state of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name."*
 - **1 Samuel 2:1:** *Then Hannah prayed and said, "My heart rejoices in the Lord; my horn is exalted in the Lord. My mouth speaks boldly against my enemies, because I rejoice in your salvation."*
- Like Hannah, Mary begins by rejoicing in God's salvation and exalting the Lord for what he has done for her personally. She celebrates that God has been mindful of the humble state of his servant and declares that from now on all generations will call her blessed, because the Mighty One has done great things for her and his name is holy.
- Mary's song quickly moves from personal joy to a broader reflection on how God acts in history. She proclaims that his mercy extends to those who fear him from generation to generation, that he has performed mighty deeds with his arm, scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts, brought down rulers from their thrones, and lifted the humble, filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.
 - **Luke 1:50–53:** *His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has done mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones and exalted those who were humble. He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.*
- The dominant theme of the Magnificat is reversal: God overturns the world's expectations by humbling the proud and exalting the lowly, feeding the hungry and sending the self-satisfied away empty. In Mary's own life, the humble maiden is exalted above all women to become the mother of the Son of God; in the larger story, barren couples like Zechariah and Elizabeth are given a prophet, and an oppressed, diminished nation is about to receive its long-awaited Messiah.



- Mary concludes her song by focusing on God's faithfulness to Israel, declaring that he has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised their ancestors. This connects the coming of Jesus directly to the Abrahamic covenant and shows that the child in her womb is the fulfillment of promises God made centuries earlier.
 - **Luke 1:54–55:** *He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he spoke to our fathers.*
- The final note in Luke's narrative for this section is that Mary stays with Elizabeth for about three months and then returns home, spending the early part of her pregnancy in the company of a woman who understands God's miraculous work and shares in the joy that both their children represent for Israel.

What God Did Then

- Mary's song in Luke 1 echoes Hannah's song and many other Old Testament passages, showing that what God is doing in Christ is consistent with how he has always worked. He keeps his covenant promises across centuries—fulfilling the word he spoke to David a thousand years earlier, honoring the oath he swore to Abraham, and now sending the Messiah in the fullness of time.
- The themes in Mary's song can be summarized as four reversals: God's favor to Mary exalts a humble maid among all women; God brings down the proud and powerful while lifting the humble; God feeds the hungry with good things and sends the rich away empty; and God lifts Israel as a nation, helping his servant and remembering his mercy. These reversals show that the arrival of Jesus is not a minor adjustment to the status quo but a fundamental overturning of human pride, power, and self-reliance.
- Mary is blessed because she believes the Lord, taking him at his word, even when she cannot see how all the details will work, and even though her obedience will cost her socially. Her example calls believers to respond to God's promises with the same trust, recognizing that God's character and covenant faithfulness are the anchor for faith in confusing and costly circumstances.
- The story of "The Humble Maiden and the Mighty God" reminds us that God delights to work through the lowly, neglected, and ordinary to accomplish his greatest purposes. In Mary, God chooses a young, obscure girl from a small town to bear the King of kings; in doing so, he demonstrates that his grace does not follow human hierarchies and that his salvation is a gift, not a reward for status or achievement.



- For us today, Mary's story and song invite us to trust that God still reverses fortunes: he lifts sinners from guilt to forgiveness, the spiritually poor to the riches of his grace, the lonely into his family, and the hopeless into a living hope through Jesus. As we reflect on this part of the Christmas story, we are called to join Mary in magnifying the Lord, rejoicing in God our Savior, and aligning our hearts with his passion to humble the proud, exalt the lowly, and keep his promises to his people in Christ.



Part 6 – The Righteous Man and the Royal Child

Why Does God Give Us the Christmas Story?

- The Christmas story is not introduced as a list of commands or principles; Matthew does not begin with “do this” or “apply that,” but with a narrative of what God has done in history. Rather than giving us moral slogans or abstract doctrines, he opens with the story of God’s angelic intervention into the lives of two faithful couples: an older couple, Zechariah and Elizabeth, who have never had children, and a young couple, Mary and Joseph, who are pledged to be married but are not yet together, showing that Christmas is first and foremost about God’s action, not ours.
- This story breaks over four hundred years of divine silence between the Old and New Testaments; no prophet had spoken, no fresh revelation had been given, and many wondered if God still remembered his promises. In Mary’s song, which we studied previously, she celebrated how God reverses fortunes by scattering the proud, bringing down rulers, lifting the humble, filling the hungry with good things, and sending the rich away empty; now Matthew shows how God continues that significant reversal through the coming of the King.

Darkness and the Promise of Light

- Long before Joseph wrestled with Mary’s unexpected pregnancy, the prophet Isaiah described a world full of spiritual darkness and promised that God would send a great light. Isaiah spoke some seven hundred years before Christ to a people living in distress, sin, and rebellion, and he promised that the gloom would not have the last word because God himself would act to honor Galilee and shine light on those living in deep darkness.
 - **Isaiah 9:1–2:** *There will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honor Galilee of the nations, by the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness, on them the light has shone.*
- Isaiah’s words could describe multiple eras: the eighth century BC, when Assyria threatened and invaded; the first century AD, when Rome ruled over a diminished Israel; and our own day, when cultures still run hard after sin and rebellion against God. For Isaiah’s audience, the light was still coming; for first-century believers, the light had arrived in the birth of Jesus; for us



today, the light has come and continues to shine, even though we still live in a world that feels dark.

- We study the Christmas story because we too inhabit that darkness and desperately need the light that only Christ brings. The purpose of revisiting these passages each year is not nostalgia but renewal, as we remember that Jesus remains the light in our darkness and that God keeps the promises he made centuries earlier.

The Eternal and Global King

- Matthew begins his Gospel with a genealogy, but he tells us in the very first verse what that genealogy is meant to demonstrate: Jesus is the Messiah, the King, the Son of David, and the Son of Abraham. These two titles are replete with covenantal meaning because they recall God's binding promises to David and Abraham, which together describe a king whose rule is both eternal and global.
 - **Matthew 1:1:** *The record of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.*
- God's covenant with David promised an eternal throne and kingdom to his offspring, a promise that no merely human king ever completely fulfilled.
 - **2 Samuel 7:13:** *He will build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.*
- God's covenant with Abraham promised that he would make Abraham into a great nation, bless him, make his name great, and bless all the families or nations of the earth through him.
 - **Genesis 12:1–3:** *The Lord said to Abram, go from your country, and from your relatives and your father's house, to the land that I will show you. I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.*
- Putting these together, Matthew presents Jesus as the fulfillment of both covenants: the Son of David, whose kingdom is eternal, and the Son of Abraham through whom all the nations are blessed. He is the "global and eternal King," the one whose reign never ends and whose salvation reaches to every people group on earth.



- Matthew's Jewish readers would immediately recognize the significance of this opening. By naming David and Abraham, Matthew signals that he will show how God has kept his ancient promises in the person of Jesus. Every time we read "Messiah" in Matthew, we ought to hear "the anointed King who is both eternal and global in his reign."
-

The Problem of Joseph

- Matthew structures Jesus' genealogy in three sets of fourteen generations: from Abraham to David, from David to the Babylonian exile, and from the exile to Jesus. The first section highlights the story of fatherhood, as God carries his promise from Abraham through Isaac, Jacob, Judah, and ultimately to David; the second section shows the royal line leading down to the catastrophe of exile, including the mention of David's sin with Bathsheba (identified pointedly as "Uriah's wife"), proving that the genealogy is not a sanitized list of heroes but includes deeply flawed people.
- The third section traces the line from the exile up to Joseph, showing that the royal bloodline continued through generations of kings who never actually sat on a throne. By the time we reach verses 15–16, we see Jacob as the father of Joseph, who is presented as "the husband of Mary," and Mary as the mother of Jesus, who is called the Messiah; the wording deliberately breaks the pattern of "A was the father of B" and forces us to notice that Joseph is not called the father of Jesus.
- In other words, the genealogy appears to be building the case that Jesus is descended from David and Abraham through Joseph, only to stop short of saying that Joseph fathered Jesus, which leaves us with a puzzle. Matthew has introduced Jesus as the eternal and universal King from David's and Abraham's lineage. Still, he insists that Joseph, the man who appears at the end of the genealogy, is not Jesus's biological father, thereby raising the question of how Jesus can be the son of David and Abraham.
- This tension compels us to keep reading, because the story that follows in Matthew 1:18–25 will explain how Jesus can be both the true Son of God and the legal heir of David's throne through Joseph.

A Crisis for a Righteous Man

- Matthew now shifts from the genealogy to the narrative of Jesus' birth, telling the story from Joseph's perspective. He explains that Mary, Jesus' mother, was betrothed to Joseph, but before



they came together, she was found to be pregnant by the Holy Spirit. Matthew provides few details, but the timing suggests this occurred after Mary had returned from her three months with Elizabeth.

- **Matthew 1:18:** *Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: when his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit.*
- Joseph knows that he is not the father, and from his point of view, the only logical conclusion is that Mary has been unfaithful. In a culture where betrothal was legally binding and sexual purity was highly valued, pregnancy during betrothal would be a scandal, and people in the village would likely assume Joseph was the father, which would tarnish his reputation and raise questions about his character as a righteous man.
- Matthew describes Joseph as “righteous,” meaning that he is committed to doing what is right in God’s eyes, and this righteousness shapes how he responds to the crisis. He does not want to expose Mary to public humiliation or the possibility of severe punishment, so he decides to divorce her quietly, in the presence of only a couple of witnesses, thereby clearing his own name without seeking revenge or maximum penalty for Mary.
 - **Matthew 1:19:** *And Joseph her husband, being a righteous man and not wanting to disgrace her, planned to send her away secretly.*
- Joseph’s plan shows both his commitment to righteousness and his compassion: he believes Mary has sinned against him, yet he chooses the most merciful course available within the law. At this point in the story, he has no reason to suspect that something miraculous is happening; he is simply a good man trying to respond wisely in a painful and confusing situation.

God Speaks in a Dream

- As Joseph considers these things, God intervenes again, this time through an angel appearing to Joseph in a dream. Dreams were widely recognized in Scripture as one of the ways God communicates, and the prophet Joel had foretold a time when God would pour out his Spirit on all people, so that sons and daughters would prophesy. Old men would dream dreams, signaling a new era of revelation.
 - **Matthew 1:20–21:** *But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child who has been conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son,*



and you shall name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

- **Joel 2:28:** *And it will come about after this that I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions.*
- The angel addresses Joseph as "son of David," reminding him of his royal lineage and subtly linking the message to the promises made to David. He tells Joseph not to be afraid to take Mary home as his wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit; Mary has not betrayed him, but God has done a miraculous work in her womb.
- The angel instructs Joseph that Mary will give birth to a son, and Joseph is to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins. The name "Jesus" is the Greek form of the Hebrew name Joshua and means "the Lord saves" or "Yahweh is salvation"; by commanding Joseph to give this name to the child, the angel reveals both the child's mission and Joseph's role in that mission.
- At this point, we have learned that Jesus is the divinely conceived Savior who will rescue his people from their sins, that he is connected to David's line through Joseph, and that God is fulfilling ancient prophetic expectations of renewed revelation through dreams and visions in the last days.

Emmanuel, God With Us

- Matthew pauses his narrative to explain that all this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet Isaiah. He quotes Isaiah's prophecy about a virgin conceiving and giving birth to a son and people calling him Immanuel, which means "God with us," thereby linking the miraculous conception of Jesus directly to the sign foretold seven centuries earlier.
 - **Matthew 1:22–23:** *Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: Behold, the virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel, which means God with us.*
 - **Isaiah 7:14:** *Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call his name Immanuel.*
- In Isaiah's day, the prophecy had a near fulfillment for King Ahaz, who was promised a sign that within the time it took for a child to grow up, the political crisis threatening Judah would be resolved. The Hebrew word Isaiah uses for "young woman" or "virgin" (*alma*) has a wide range of



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meanings and does not necessarily indicate a miracle. Still, when Matthew quotes the prophecy in Greek, he uses a term that clearly means “virgin,” highlighting the unique, miraculous nature of Mary’s conception.

- The name Immanuel, “God with us,” is radical in a world where gods are viewed as distant beings who must be pursued or appeased through rituals and sacrifices. The astonishing claim of Christmas is that the true God is not waiting for us to climb up to him; instead, he writes himself into the story, coming down into our world to be with us, to pursue us when we were not chasing him, and to save us when we did not even acknowledge that we were lost.
- In Jesus, Isaiah’s prophecy is fulfilled in a far deeper way than anyone could have anticipated: the child born of the virgin is not simply a sign of God’s presence, but is, in his very person, God in the flesh, fully divine and fully human, entering into our darkness as the promised light.

Adoption into the Royal Line

- After the dream, Joseph wakes up and does exactly what the angel of the Lord commanded him: he takes Mary home as his wife, but he does not consummate the marriage until she gives birth to a son. Joseph’s obedience is immediate and costly; he accepts the social misunderstanding that will come with Mary’s pregnancy, chooses to trust God’s word over appearances, and adjusts his own plans to fit the Lord’s revealed will.
 - **Matthew 1:24–25:** *And Joseph awoke from his sleep and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took Mary as his wife, but kept her a virgin until she gave birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.*
- Crucially, Joseph names the child “Jesus,” as the angel commanded, and in doing so, he legally adopts Jesus into his own line. In Jewish and Roman practice, naming a child was a way of claiming and acknowledging him as one’s own; just as Julius Caesar adopted Gaius Octavius and gave him his own name, making him Caesar Augustus and heir to his position, so Joseph, by naming Jesus, brings him into the line of David and Abraham.
- Although Jesus is not biologically descended from Joseph, he becomes Joseph’s legal son and thus the legal heir to Davidic kingship. This resolves the tension created by the genealogy: Matthew can present Jesus as the son of David and Abraham because Joseph, the son of David, has adopted him, and at the same time, he can insist that Jesus is uniquely the Son of God, conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary.



- Joseph stands alongside Zechariah and Mary as part of the cast of the Christmas story: Zechariah receives an angelic visitation, initially questions, then believes and obeys; Mary wonders how the promise can be, then believes and obeys; Joseph wrestles with what he thinks is betrayal, then hears from God in a dream and feels and obeys. Their responses invite us to consider whether we, too, will trust and obey the God who has acted in Christ.

The Global and Eternal King in Our Darkness

- Matthew's account of the virgin birth is not merely a puzzling biological claim or a sentimental nativity detail; it is the theological foundation for recognizing Jesus as both truly God and truly man. Only if he is conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of a woman can he be both Immanuel, God with us, and the second Adam, the representative man who bears our sin and gives us his righteousness.
- The darkness Isaiah described in his day and that still characterized first-century Judea is recognizable in our own context: cultures that pursue sin and rebellion against God, people who chase after other "gods" of power, pleasure, and security, and communities that feel oppressed, fearful, or forgotten. The good news of Christmas is that the light Isaiah promised has come in Jesus, that he continues to shine into our darkness, and that his kingdom is both eternal and global.
- As the global and eternal King, Jesus fulfills the covenant with Abraham by bringing blessing to all nations and the covenant with David by reigning forever on a throne of justice and righteousness. His name, Jesus, declares that he saves his people from their sins; his title, Immanuel, declares that he is God with us; together they proclaim that God himself is saving us and that he has chosen to do so by entering our history in the most humble and astonishing manner.
- The Christmas story calls us not to adopt a set of seasonal principles but to respond to a person: will we believe and obey the King who came to save us? In a world that is still dark, we are invited to celebrate that the light has already come, to trust in the virgin-born King who is both eternal and global, and to live as people who know that God has written himself into our story so that we might be written into his.



Part 7 – Light in the Midnight Stable

The Birth of Jesus at the Precipice of History

- The birth of Jesus stands at the precipice of history, the turning point by which time itself is marked, so that everything before Christmas anticipates the coming Messiah who will bring salvation. Everything after Christmas belongs to the “last days,” the end of the age. Jeremiah, writing six hundred years before Jesus, foretold that God would raise a righteous Branch for David, a king who would reign wisely, do what is right, and bring salvation and safety to God’s people. This promise frames the significance of the baby lying in a manger.
 - **Jeremiah 23:5–6:** *The days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch. He will reign as king and act wisely and do what is just and right in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called: The Lord Our Righteousness.*
- Paul looks back on the Old Testament story and insists that those events “happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come,” meaning that the entire earlier history of Israel was preparing for the time of Christ. Peter, preaching at Pentecost, quotes Joel to explain that the outpouring of the Spirit in Acts 2 fulfills God’s promise that “in the last days” he would pour out his Spirit on all people. He later writes that Christ was chosen before the creation of the world, but revealed in these last times for our sake.
 - **1 Corinthians 10:11:** *These things happened to them as examples and were written down for our instruction, on whom the ends of the ages have come.*
 - **Acts 2:16–17:** *But this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: in the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people, and your sons and your daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, and your old men will dream dreams.*
 - **1 Peter 1:20:** *He was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was revealed in these last times for your sake.*
- These passages together teach that with the coming of Jesus, the “ages” have reached their fulfillment and the “last days” have begun. The birth of Jesus is therefore not a quaint religious legend. Still, the decisive moment when the righteous King promised by Jeremiah arrives, and the long-prepared plan of God moves into its final stage, which will culminate in Christ’s return.



Caesar's Census

- Luke begins his account of Jesus' birth by anchoring it firmly in world history: he tells us that in those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world, and that this was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria. By rooting the story in the reign of a specific emperor and the administration of a particular governor, Luke emphasizes that the birth of Jesus occurred at a real, datable moment in history rather than in a timeless myth.
 - **Luke 2:1–3:** *In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that a census should be taken of all the inhabited earth. This was the first census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. And everyone was going to register for the census, each to his own town.*
- Caesar Augustus (Gaius Octavius) ruled from 27 BC to AD 14 as the first true Roman emperor. He was celebrated as a bringer of peace and stability, even receiving divine honors in some parts of the empire. Luke subtly contrasts this “peaceful emperor” with the real Emperor of peace, because while Augustus issues decrees and collects taxes, Jesus will bring a more profound peace with God that no imperial program can provide.
- In the later years of his reign, Augustus ordered a census to make taxation more efficient, and for the Jews, this meant returning to their ancestral towns where tribal and family records were kept. Luke mentions Quirinius and the census to show that Rome was tightening its administrative control, but behind this political move stands God's sovereign hand, using an emperor's tax policy to move Joseph and Mary into position so that the Messiah will be born exactly where God had promised.
- Luke's reference to Quirinius has to be read alongside Acts 5:37, where Gamaliel recalls a later census “in the days of the census” when Judas the Galilean led a revolt; this helps modern readers distinguish between multiple censuses and reinforces Luke's concern to place Jesus' birth within the real sweep of Roman history.
 - **Acts 5:37:** *After him, Judas the Galilean appeared in the days of the census and led a revolt. He also perished, and all who followed him were scattered.*

The House of Bread

- Luke next explains why Joseph and Mary end up in Bethlehem: Joseph goes up from Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem, the town of David, because he belongs to the house and line of



David, and he goes there to register with Mary, who is pledged to be married to him and is expecting a child. Bethlehem lies in the Judean hills about five miles south of Jerusalem. Hence, the journey from Nazareth is roughly 70 miles of mostly uphill walking, likely undertaken when Mary was still able to travel, rather than in the last days of pregnancy, as many Christmas cards imply.

- **Luke 2:4–7:** *Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David which is called Bethlehem, because he was from the house and family line of David, in order to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to give birth, and she gave birth to her firstborn son. She wrapped him in cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.*
- Joseph's need to return to his ancestral town indicates that his family had moved north to Nazareth at some point, but their origin remained in Bethlehem, where the records were kept; the census forces him back to the place where David had once been born and raised. God uses the emperor's decree and Joseph's family history to bring Mary and her child to the exact town that the prophet Micah had identified centuries earlier as the birthplace of the ruler whose origins date back to ancient times.
 - **Micah 5:2:** *But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, from you one will go out for me to be ruler in Israel. His origins are from of old, from ancient days.*
- Luke's simple statement that while they were there, the time came for the baby to be born suggests that Mary and Joseph had been in Bethlehem for some time before the birth, perhaps weeks or even a couple of months, not minutes or hours. Mary gives birth to her firstborn son, wraps him in cloths, and lays him in a manger "because there was no guest room available for them," a phrase that likely refers not to a commercial inn with a harsh innkeeper. In addition to the extra room, many simple village homes were converted into guest spaces, all of which were already occupied by the influx of people returning for the census.
- In a small farming village like Bethlehem, most families would live in one main room, sometimes with a semi-enclosed lower area or front section where a few animals could be brought in at night for warmth and protection; the manger would be a feeding trough carved into the floor or set into that area. With the inner guest rooms full, Mary and Joseph are offered space near the animals—still under a family roof but in the humblest part of the house—which is why Jesus is born in what we might call a "midnight stable": a private home's animal area rather than a freestanding barn.



- The manager, then, becomes a sign of both poverty and hospitality: the best spaces are already taken, yet someone makes room in the leftover space for this young couple, and the newborn King of all creation is laid where an ordinary household would feed its animals. This is already a quiet, visual sermon about the humility of God, who comes not in palatial luxury but in the simplest corner of an overcrowded home.

Shepherds in the Night

- Luke shifts the scene from the indoor world of the birth to the fields outside Bethlehem, where shepherds are living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks at night. Shepherds were lowly in social status and lived on the margins of society, but they also symbolized those who care for God's people; the story, therefore, deliberately moves from Caesar in his palace to anonymous shepherds in the dark, underlining the contrast between worldly power and God's chosen recipients of good news.
 - **Luke 2:8–14:** *In the same region there were shepherds staying out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock at night. And an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terribly afraid. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." And suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased."*
- As the shepherds watch over their sheep—possibly animals destined for sacrifice in Jerusalem—an angel of the Lord appears, and the glory of the Lord shines around them. They are terrified, as people always are when confronted with the reality of God's glory. The angel quickly reassures them not to be afraid and announces "good news of great joy that will be for all the people": a Savior has been born to them in the town of David, who is Christ the Lord; the titles pile up to identify the baby as the promised Messiah, the royal Savior, and the divine Lord.
- The angel gives them a specific sign so they can verify this astounding announcement: they will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. Babies wrapped in cloths were common, but babies placed in mangers were not; the combination of these details ensures that when the shepherds see such a baby, they will know they have found the one of whom the angel spoke.
- Suddenly, a great company of the heavenly host appears with the angel, praising God and declaring glory to God in the highest heaven and peace on earth to those on whom his favor



rests. In a world where Caesar Augustus is hailed as a bringer of peace and stability, the heavenly choir reveals the trustworthy source of peace: it flows from God's favor through the child lying in a feeding trough, not from imperial policies or armies.

- Luke's story thus moves from political power to humble poverty, from an emperor's decree to a choir of angels, from the darkness of a hillside to the light of God's glory. The first people to hear the birth announcement are not priests, scholars, or nobility, but working shepherds, which fits the pattern of God lifting the humble and exalting the lowly that Mary had already sung about.

The Shepherds' Response

- When the angels leave and return to heaven, the shepherds immediately decide to go to Bethlehem to see what has happened, indicating that faith for them means acting on what they have heard. They hurry off, find Mary and Joseph and the baby lying in the manger just as the angel had said, and then they spread the word concerning what they have been told about this child, becoming the first human evangelists of the newborn Messiah.
 - **Luke 2:15–20:** *When the angels had gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go straight to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." So they came in a hurry and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger. When they had seen this, they made known the statement that had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. The shepherds went back, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as it had been told them.*
- Everyone who hears the shepherds' report is amazed. At the same time, Mary treasures up all these things and ponders them in her heart, quietly reflecting on how God is fulfilling his promises through events that are both ordinary and astonishing. The shepherds return to their fields, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told, modeling the proper response to the good news: hearing, seeing, trusting, and worshiping.
- Luke then notes that on the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise the child, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given before he was conceived. Circumcision places Jesus within the covenant people of Israel, identifying him with the line of Abraham and the law of Moses. At the same time, the giving of the name Jesus ("the Lord saves") declares his mission to save his



people from their sins and connects this scene back to the earlier angelic announcements to Mary and Joseph.

- **Luke 2:21:** *When eight days were completed so that he could be circumcised, he was named Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.*
- Born to peasant parents, laid in a feeding trough, visited by lowly shepherds, and circumcised according to the law, Jesus begins his earthly life in profound humility and complete identification with his people. Yet at the same time, he is the righteous Branch promised by Jeremiah, the Savior and Lord announced by the angel, and the true King whose birth is heralded in the heavens and quietly acknowledged in a crowded village home.

The Greatest Reversal

- The details of Luke 2 reveal what Mary already sang in Luke 1: God reverses human expectations and overturns worldly values. The King of all creation comes not as a powerful adult in armor or royal robes, but as a newborn whose crib is a manger; he is not born in Rome, the center of imperial power, but in Bethlehem, a small town in the Judean hills; he is not welcomed by high officials but by shepherds who smell like their sheep.
- This is “the greatest reversal of all”: the One whose origins are from ancient times and whose kingdom is eternal allows himself to be born into the lowliest conditions of humanity. The Bread of Life is born in Bethlehem, the “House of Bread,” and laid in a feeding trough, visually hinting at the way he will later give himself as proper food and drink for those who believe in him.
- The scene underscores that God’s salvation is not for the impressive but for the humble and needy. If the righteous Branch and true King begins his earthly life among peasants and shepherds, then no one is too insignificant to be included in his kingdom, and no one can claim entrance to that kingdom based on status, wealth, or power.

Living in the Light of the Midnight Stable

- For us today, the story of “Light in the Midnight Stable” is a reminder that we still live in a dark world, but the light has already come. The darkness Isaiah described, the political oppression of the first century, and the moral confusion of our own age all point to the same fundamental problem: people are lost without God and in need of a Savior; Christmas announces that the Savior has come and that he is both willing and able to save.



- The birth of Jesus in such humble circumstances calls us to humility, gratitude, and trust. We are invited to see ourselves in the shepherds who hear the good news, go to see the child for themselves, and then return glorifying and praising God; like them, we are called to respond with faith, share what we have seen and heard, and live as people whose lives are shaped by the arrival of this King.
- The preacher concludes by praying that this baby—born in Bethlehem, laid in a manger, named Jesus—would be our righteous Savior, saving us from our sins in the same way he saved people in the first century. As we celebrate Christmas, we are called to remember that the baby in the midnight stable is the global and eternal King, the righteous Branch, the Savior and Lord, and to entrust ourselves to him as the one who stepped into our world in humility so that we could be lifted into his kingdom in grace.



Part 8 – A Star for the Nations

Trumpets and the Day of the Lord

- This final message in the series opens on the cusp of a new year with the imagery of the Feast of Trumpets, when Israel would blow trumpets, cease from work, and present burnt offerings and sin offerings. The trumpets served as an alarm and a summons to introspection and repentance during the ten days preceding the Day of Atonement, and the prophets regarded them as foreshadowing the ultimate day of the Lord, when God would judge sin and bring salvation.
- The preacher reminds us that the Bible is God's word for us, not primarily as a set of detached instructions, but as one grand story in which God makes himself known—from creation to Christ's return. We are following Jesus, so we study the Gospels to know our Savior and learn how to follow him; the story of the Magi in Matthew 2 is not a decorative add-on to Christmas but part of this mission and movement of the Master, revealing who he is and how the nations respond to him.

Meeting the Magi

- Matthew makes it clear that the visit of the Magi takes place **after** Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, during the time of King Herod. This story is not another birth scene to be squeezed into the stable; it is a later episode, likely around a year after Jesus' birth, when the child is now living in a house with Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem.
 - **Matthew 2:1–3:** *After Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of King Herod, magi from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." When King Herod heard this, he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.*
- Matthew tells us that Magi from the East come to Jerusalem and ask, "Where is the one who has been born King of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." Their question is politically explosive: they are asking the man who has taken the title "King of the Jews" where the **new** King of the Jews is, and Matthew notes that when Herod hears this, he is disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. The star has told the Magi three things: there has been a birth, the one born is a king, and he is a Jew; they respond by undertaking a costly journey to worship him.



Persian Scholars and Middle Management

- The Magi were not three wandering mystics on camels but a Gentile caste of high-ranking political and religious advisors in the Persian imperial courts. Historically, they served as administrators, scholars, and counselors to the kings, and they studied a wide range of subjects, including government, law, ancient and sacred texts, and the movements of the heavens.
- In the days of Daniel, we learn that a Jewish exile was appointed over precisely this class of officials. Daniel's wisdom and insight led King Nebuchadnezzar to appoint him to oversee the magicians, enchanters, astrologers, and diviners, indicating that Jewish Scripture and prophecy likely entered the intellectual world of the Magi centuries before the birth of Christ.
 - **Daniel 5:11:** *There is a man in your kingdom who has the spirit of the holy gods in him. In the days of your father he was found to have insight and intelligence and wisdom like the wisdom of the gods. Your father, King Nebuchadnezzar, appointed him chief of the magicians, enchanters, astrologers, and diviners.*
- Travel in the ancient world was dangerous and difficult, especially when one had to go around the Syrian desert between Mesopotamia and Judea. The Magi would not have traveled as a group of three; instead, as middle-management government officials and scholars, they would have come with a substantial entourage, including guards, servants, and animal handlers. A caravan of perhaps twenty to fifty people arriving in Jerusalem, dressed in Persian finery and asking about a new Jewish king, would have appeared more like a diplomatic mission than a quiet visit, which helps explain why all Jerusalem is disturbed, including Herod.

From the Divided Kingdom to Roman and Persian Tension

- To understand the tension in Matthew 2, the preacher reviews Israel's history from the divided monarchy onwards. After Saul, David, and Solomon, the kingdom splits: the northern kingdom (Israel) is eventually assimilated into Assyria in 722 BC, while the southern kingdom (Judah) is exiled to Babylon in 586 BC for seventy years, in the days of Daniel and Ezekiel, with figures like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego also in the story.
- Babylon falls to Persia, and Cyrus allows the Jews to return and rebuild Jerusalem, but fewer than half go back; many remain in Babylon and later in Susa, where Jews like Esther and Nehemiah rise to influential positions. Between the close of the Old Testament and the opening of the New, the Greek Empire under Alexander the Great conquers Persia, and after Alexander's death, his



empire fractures, with the Seleucids ruling both Jews and Persians for a time; Jewish revolt (Maccabees) and Persian resistance both struggle for independence.

- Eventually, Rome conquers the Greek world, and the Greek Empire becomes the Roman Empire, but the Persians remain a significant eastern power. The first-century world is shaped by ongoing skirmishes and border conflicts between Rome and Persia; in that context, a group of Persian scholars and officials showing up in Jerusalem, the capital of a Roman client kingdom, asking about a new king of the Jews, could easily be interpreted as a political probe or even a prelude to conflict. It is not surprising that Herod and all Jerusalem are disturbed.

The Star and the Scepter

- Much ink has been spilled about what the Magi saw in the sky: a new star, a conjunction of planets, a comet, a nova, or something else. Matthew is not interested in satisfying our astronomical curiosity; his concern is theological, and he roots the story of the star in the Old Testament by echoing a prophecy in Numbers about a future ruler.
 - **Numbers 24:17:** *I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob, and a scepter will rise from Israel. He will crush the forehead of Moab and strike down all the sons of Sheth.*
- In this oracle, the pagan seer Balaam speaks of someone he sees “but not now,” someone he beholds “but not near”: a star coming out of Jacob and a scepter rising out of Israel. The star-and-scepter imagery signals the rise of a king from Israel who will defeat Israel’s enemies and extend God’s rule. Although the prophecy is obscure and had an immediate horizon, Matthew’s narrative suggests that, in the fullness of time, it finds a deeper fulfillment in the birth of Jesus, the King of the Jews, whose coming is somehow signaled by a star.
- Whether the Magi knew this specific prophecy or learned pieces of it through the influence of Daniel and other Jewish exiles is not stated, but the connection helps us see the star not as an isolated marvel but as part of a larger pattern of God using creation to announce the coming of his King. The star tells them “birth, king, Jews,” and they act on that revelation by making a costly journey to worship the child.

The God Who Names the Stars

- The sermon pauses to ask what Scripture says about stars and constellations, because we often only think about stars in connection with the Christmas story and the wise men. In Job, one of



the earliest books of the Old Testament, God confronts Job with a series of questions that highlight Job's limitations and God's sovereignty, including questions about constellations.

- **Job 38:31–33:** *Can you bind the chains of the Pleiades or loosen the cords of Orion? Can you lead forth the constellations in their season or guide the Bear with its satellites? Do you know the ordinances of the heavens, or can you establish their rule over the earth?*
- God asks whether Job can bind the chains of the Pleiades or loosen Orion's belt, whether he can bring forth constellations in their seasons or lead out the Bear with its cubs, and whether he knows the laws of the heavens or can establish God's dominion over the earth. The point is that God authored the stars and controls their ordering; he names specific constellations and claims ownership over them, reminding us that the heavens are his handiwork, not ours to control.
 - **Isaiah 40:26:** *Lift up your eyes on high and see who created these. He brings out the starry host by number, calling them all by name. Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing.*
- Isaiah likewise urges his hearers to lift their eyes and look to the heavens, asking who created all these stars and answering that it is God who brings out the starry host one by one and calls forth each of them by name. Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing; the stars are not random or independent forces, but part of God's carefully ordered creation.
- These passages together teach that stars are God's property, tools in his hand rather than powers in their own right. When Matthew speaks of a star leading the Magi, he is not endorsing astrology but showing that the God who names and orders the stars can use them to point seekers to his Son, the true King.

The Warning Against Worshiping the Heavens

- Scripture also gives a clear warning about the danger of worshiping the sun, moon, and stars instead of the Creator who made them. Moses warns Israel not to be enticed by the heavenly bodies they see in the sky and not to bow down to them or serve them.
 - **Deuteronomy 4:19:** *And when you look up to the sky and see the sun, the moon, and the stars, all the host of heaven, do not be drawn away and bow down to them or serve them. The Lord your God has allotted them to all the peoples under the whole heaven.*
- God apportioned the sun, moon, and stars for all nations under heaven, but they are never to be objects of worship; to turn them into gods is to trade the Creator for his creation, which is a



fundamental form of idolatry. The Magi may have engaged in practices that we would categorize as astrology, seeking divine messages in the stars. Yet, Matthew is careful to show that their journey ultimately leads them away from star-gazing to Christ-gazing, away from creation-worship to Creator-worship.

- The sermon emphasizes that while God can use the stars to tell a story or to signal something important, we are not to follow stars as if they were gods. In this narrative, the stars are servants of God's purposes, guiding the Magi to the King of the Jews, where their attention shifts from the sky to the child, and their posture shifts from calculating signs to bowing in worship.

Herod, the Magi, and the Child

- Matthew 2:1–18 is the whole narrative canvas for this message. It includes not only the arrival of the Magi but also Herod's fear, the consultation with the chief priests and teachers of the law, the star's guidance to Bethlehem, the gifts, the divine warning, the flight to Egypt, and Herod's brutal slaughter of the boys in and around Bethlehem.
- Herod, an Idumean (Edomite) who has worked for Rome and taken the title "King of the Jews," hears about a child who has been **born** King of the Jews and is alarmed, because a born king is a threat to a made king. He calls together the Jewish chief priests and teachers of the law to ask where the Messiah is to be born, and they quote the prophet Micah, who foretold that a ruler would come from Bethlehem in Judea to shepherd God's people, Israel.
- The Magi, having been directed from Jerusalem to Bethlehem by Israel's Scriptures, see the star again as they go on their way; it goes ahead of them and stops over the place where the child is. They are overjoyed when they see the star, and when they come to the house, they know the child (not a newborn infant but a small child) with his mother, Mary, bowing down and worshipping him.
 - **Matthew 2:11:** *When they came into the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.*
- Opening their treasures, they present gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh—three precious and symbolically rich offerings that quietly preach who Jesus is and what he has come to do. Warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they return to their country by another route; Joseph is likewise warned in a dream and flees with Mary and Jesus to Egypt, and Herod, in furious rage, orders the killing of all boys two years old and under in the vicinity of Bethlehem, fulfilling Jeremiah's words about Rachel weeping for her children.



- Taken together, the passage shows both Gentile worship and brutal opposition: the nations come to honor the King while the local ruler seeks to destroy him. Matthew's readers can see that even Herod's fury cannot derail God's plan; the child is preserved, Scripture is fulfilled, and the story moves forward toward the cross and resurrection.

The Meaning of the Gifts

- The three gifts given by the Magi are not random luxury items; in the history of interpretation, they have come to be seen as richly symbolic of Jesus' identity and mission. Gold is a gift fit for a king, acknowledging Jesus' royal status as the Son of David and the rightful King of the Jews; frankincense, used in worship as incense rising to God, can be seen as representing perfection and mediation, pointing to Jesus as the perfect mediator between God and humanity. Myrrh, a spice associated with burial and the masking of the smell of death, points forward to Jesus' sacrificial death and the way his body will later be prepared for burial.
- These meanings would not necessarily have been evident to the Magi, but they are clear to us as readers who know the rest of the story. Standing at the beginning of the Gospel, the gifts quietly foreshadow the end: the King who deserves gold will wear a crown of thorns, the perfect mediator who deserves the sweet smell of incense will hang on a cross between God and sinners, and the one anointed with myrrh will conquer death and rise again.
- For Joseph and Mary, living in a simple house in Bethlehem with a toddler, the arrival of a foreign diplomatic entourage bearing costly treasures would have been overwhelming and unexpected. Yet these gifts not only provide material support for the family (possibly funding their flight to and time in Egypt) but also serve as divine commentary on the significance of the child they are raising.

The Long Battle of the Brothers

- The sermon draws a line from Herod back to Esau to show that the conflict between Herod and Jesus is the latest chapter in a much older story. Herod was an Idumean, descended from the Edomites, who in turn descended from Esau, while Jesus is a descendant of Jacob (Israel); thus, the old tension between Esau and Jacob continues in the clash between Herod and the Messiah.
 - **Genesis 25:22–23:** *The children struggled together within her, and she said, "If it is like this, why is this happening to me?" So she went to inquire of the Lord. And the Lord said to her,*



"Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people shall be stronger than the other, and the older shall serve the younger."

- In Genesis, Rebekah is troubled by the jostling of the twins in her womb, and she inquires of the Lord, who tells her that two nations are in her womb and two peoples from within her will be separated; one will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger. Esau, the older, represents a line that often opposes God's chosen purposes. At the same time, Jacob, renamed Israel, carries forward the covenant promises and becomes the father of the nation from whom the Messiah will come.
- When Herod, an Edomite "king of the Jews," seeks to kill Jesus, the newborn King from Jacob's line, we see this brotherly battle carried into the New Testament. Yet God's sovereign plan is never in doubt: he flings the stars into the sky in such a way that scholars in the East recognize the birth of a Jewish King, he protects his Son from Herod's murderous rage, and he carries forward the story he has been writing since Genesis, ensuring that the promise given to Jacob and his descendants culminates in Jesus.

A Star for the Nations

- The story of the Magi and the Messiah reveals that from the very beginning, Jesus is not only the King of the Jews but the King of the nations. The first recorded worshipers of the young Jesus in Matthew's Gospel are Gentile scholars who have come from far away, having read the signs in the heavens and responded with costly, joyful worship; in them, we see the fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise that all nations on earth will be blessed through Abraham's offspring.
- The narrative also shows that God is the author and perfecter of the story: he orchestrates historical empires, prophetic promises, astronomical phenomena, and individual lives (Zechariah and Elizabeth, Mary and Joseph, Persian Magi, Herod and Jerusalem) to bring about the coming and preservation of his Son. Supernatural birth, repeated angelic visitations, divine dreams, protection from murderous rulers, and the guidance of a star all testify that the King of kings is not an accident of history but the centerpiece of God's eternal plan.
- At the close of the sermon, the preacher invites listeners to let the Magi's example shape the coming year: they recognized in Jesus the one who would stand as the perfect go-between, the mediator between a holy God and sinful people, and they came to worship him. Now, with the whole story of his life, death, and resurrection before us, we are called to the same posture of trust and worship, to mark our days by the worship of Jesus and to rest in the God who has written and fulfilled this grand story.

