

The beginning and end of our Lord's life

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This meditation on the angelic activities at the times of Jesus' birth and his final hours of sacrifice encourage readers to consider the Father's great purpose of salvation. The events of our lives, overseen by the angels, then become a preparation for our Lord's coming again.

THERE ARE TIMES when a spine-tingling thought comes to me: How will we be called to the judgement? Will we be fetched? Or will we be taken away in an instant? Will an angel escort us from the grave when the trumpet call is made? With those thoughts in mind let us go to Nazareth, where angels looked down with wondering eyes on the lives of two young lovers. We do not know how they met or their feelings for one another. But here was Joseph, a man so righteous that he was chosen as guardian for God's own Son. What an embarrassment for him to learn of Mary's pregnancy!—yet he obeyed the angel's command to marry her. And here was Mary, chosen from all the tribes of Israel, such was her purity and, we feel sure, her love of God's law—the supreme choice who found grace in the eyes of the Lord.

Luke is precise: "And in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth, to a virgin espoused [betrothed] to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary" (1:26,27). We have not met Gabriel since the time of Daniel. His name means 'man of God', and he had a most important message from God to impart. Note that it is stated twice that Mary was a virgin, not only pointing to her holiness, but perhaps also taking us back to the moment when the virgin dust was stirred in Eden, thereby bringing us to mankind's beginnings. Betrothal was a much more solemn affair than engagement, too, looked upon as binding as marriage. If a man should die at this stage of their relationship, in the eyes of the law the woman was 'a virgin who is a widow'. Any breach of the promise to marry was akin to divorce.

However, this was not merely a tale of legal niceties to satisfy men's curiosities as they chatted around their firesides. The angel did not go to Rome, capital of the known world, or to Jerusalem, proud city of a proud people, but to Galilee and to lowly

Nazareth—a town not well thought of, for later one was to ask, "Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth?" (Jno. 1:46). The rabbis regarded the Nazarene patois as an offence, but the salvation of all the righteous would come from that despised place.

Troubled at his saying

Consider how Mary felt when the angel entered her room: "And the angel came in unto her, and said, Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women" (Lk. 1:28). How startled she must have been at the sudden appearance of this man! The face of the angel who descended to the women after the Lord's resurrection was like lightning (Mt. 28:3), and the countenance of the angel who spoke to Manoah's wife is described as "very terrible" (that is, frightening) (Judg. 13:6), so we can picture a noble demeanour.

At such an historical and breathtaking instant, what intense attention Mary must have given to the angel's message as she recovered her composure! In that moment of exaltation she was not to know that a sword would pierce her heart not many years hence, and for the moment we can imagine a feeling of overwhelming awe and gratitude, if mixed with questions. She, of all the virgins in Judah, had been chosen for this exalted office—surely an indication of the esteem in which she was held by heaven. In contrast, Eve, the mother of all living, had failed; but Mary was to bear the child promised as Eden's gates closed. A rescue plan was put in place to save God's people from perpetual death.

What if an angel appeared again, now? Perhaps he would say to us, "Greetings! You are highly

favoured. We have discussed you in heaven, and shortly you will be called to everlasting joy". What a visitation that would be, to receive such a remarkable message from God Himself! Now listen with Mary: "And when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be" (Lk. 1:29). In Scripture angelic appearances to women were always associated with the impending birth of a man of God; but feel for her, for she was troubled.

There followed the staggering promise of a son who would rule the world. He was to be King of kings, and for that purpose she would be overshadowed by the power of the Highest, the same Spirit that filled the universe! How flabbergasted she must have been. She lived in a world which Rome ruled, as depicted in Daniel's vision of four great empires, and dwelt in only a small town in Galilee. Her questioning was natural. How could she be with child? She did not say that it was impossible; had it to be by other means? Is there a hint here of her quick perception, and the ready acceptance of the supernatural message? Was this the moment foretold by Jeremiah when a woman would encompass a man (31:22)? Her response was one of deep humility and grace: 'I belong totally to the Lord. Let it happen as you say'. At that moment the conception occurred; the power of the Highest was there. Thus the Divine plan of the ages moved forward towards its culmination—the establishment of a new Paradise where men loved truth and lived it.

No room at the inn

Had it been left to Joseph, surely he would never have compelled his wife to go all the way to Bethlehem when she was so near to birth. But Rome decreed it; there was no option; and Providence ensured that our Saviour was born as the prophets had foretold. "And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn" (Lk. 2:7). *She* did so. Did a kindly neighbour assist? As the child was wrapped in strips of material, like any other baby of the time, Mary could not have known that he would again be so wrapped at the end of his all-too-short life. There was no pomp or luxurious palace for this royal child, yet heaven rejoiced at the birth.

There is an appropriateness that the joy of the moment was communicated first to shepherds. As another angel blazed the splendour of the Lord

around them, they were terrified. Who would not be, as an intense light lit up the surrounding darkness (Isa. 9:2,3)? Workingmen were the first to know of the Saviour and to receive the vital message that this was good news for *all* people. What happier news could they have received? Then, wonder of wonders, the solitary angel was joined by a vast and superb heavenly choir singing as joyfully as they had done at Creation: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men" (Lk. 2:14)!

Never had men heard such a pulsating and powerful promise, or witnessed such a panoply of magnificence. The morning stars were united in praise once more, for this was a new creation. Although in no position at that moment to observe the rituals of the Law, the shepherds looked on the Lamb of God. What excitement for weary Mary, too, when she was told, treasuring these things in her heart! And perhaps later she shared her memories of the day with Peter and John. Yet, poignantly, similar shouts were made as the Lord Jesus entered Jerusalem in his final mortal hours. What strength of resolve from him to go on still! Well can we understand why God said, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Mt. 3:17). We deny the deity of our Lord, but not his godliness.

Surely similar words have been used of us, too: 'This is My beloved child'. For as we entered the baptismal waters there was the same joy in heaven. Then we were the objects of God's goodwill, and we are now His sons and daughters, part of His family.

Looking for redemption

We turn to Simeon and Anna, perhaps well known in Israel. Anxiously they were anticipating, and when they saw Mary and Joseph with their little bundle of life, at that moment they knew that the Lord of the temple was entering the temple of the Lord. How did Simeon know? By the Spirit, perhaps from the same angel whom Mary had welcomed, requiring him to attend the temple for this great proclamation. Imagine his longing expectancy. With the babe in his arms Simeon cried, "Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace, according to Thy word: for mine eyes have seen Thy salvation, which Thou hast prepared before the face of all people; a light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of Thy people Israel" (Lk. 2:29-32). Humbly he asked, "I have seen the baby; let me die". It was a gentle resignation, a rapt thanksgiving, perhaps with a great sigh of

gratitude. Salvation was to be offered to Jew and Gentile through this child. A marvellous revelation was to be made to all nations, countering both Jewish hardness of heart and Gentile ignorance.

Anna “gave thanks likewise unto the Lord, and spake of him to all them that looked for redemption in Jerusalem” (v. 38). To *all*. Were there many? What a remarkable lady, who at such an age could give vent to such happiness! For many years she had served God happily, and many knew it. The longed-for redemption was to come through the child she looked on with reverence. She came from the tribe of Asher, meaning ‘happy’ (Gen. 30:13), and no-one could have imparted happier news.

Growing in grace

“And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, filled with wisdom: and the grace of God was upon him” (Lk. 2:40). In these words is bound up his life story. He would be strong in his will and his power of restraint. Grace was to be with him as his Creator watched his faultless life appreciatively. The impress of the Father was there. “And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man” (v. 52). He forged ahead in the furthest reach of the human mind, with an acute perception even in tender years. He saw the corruption of the ruling classes, and witnessed the evils of the world he lived in. How his mind would have been troubled at times, and on many occasions his prayers showed the anguish he felt and the weight of burden that he carried for us! Yet he steadfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem, the place of execution.

No wonder in Gethsemane that his sweat was like blood. What turmoil as the wretched hour approached! He “began to be sore amazed, and to be very heavy” (Mk. 14:33)—unprecedented stress for so noble a man. “Father, if Thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but Thine, be done. And there appeared an angel unto him from heaven, strengthening him” (Lk. 22:42,43). The words were wrung from his tortured soul, so horrible to contemplate was the future. His humanity is there in stark reality. The moment of death was near, and a more fiendish torture would be difficult to imagine. Yet, like his mother, he wanted only that God’s will be done.

Immediately the Father, moved, responded by sending His minister. Was this again the same angel who had met his mother? If so, it was to Gabriel that the task fell of informing our Lord that there was no other way. What did the angel say? Did he show a vision of the future? Surely

the experience overwhelmed our Saviour, body, soul and spirit; yet he yielded to his Father’s will. His heart was wrung with grief. There were loud crying and copious tears—how it moves us to see a strong man cry! The conquest had to come before the crown. So often our own trust falls so far short, yet God knows our needs. As the Lord arose, the disciples were found asleep; but his Father slumbered not nor slept and was acutely conscious of His Son’s need. The words come to mind, “Be strong and of a good courage”. The angel could not deliver him; and at times it is the same with us. “And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly: and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground” (v. 44).

Though ministering spirits were sent to give some relief to a sorely-tried Saviour about to undergo a hideous death, still there was the bitter opposition to endure on every side, with the catcalls and abuse quelling only as the dense darkness gave relief from the sun. Then our Lord uttered his last mortal prayer. Triumphantly summoning up every last vestige of strength, “when Jesus had cried with a loud voice, he said, Father, into Thy hands I commend my spirit: and having said thus, he gave up the [spirit]” (23:46). It is fitting for these words to have been the last prayer of a Jewish child at night, but what a glorious victory on the Lord’s resurrection morn as he completed the verse of the psalm: “Thou hast redeemed me, O LORD God of truth” (Ps. 31:5)!

What a victory! In the grave he was no better than any other dead mortal; but when the power of God moved in that tomb, the angels proclaimed, “He is not here, but is risen” (Lk. 24:6). What tidings! The angels were there once more, and with glorious news. God’s plan had succeeded in His Son. When the apostles gathered later, “they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy” (v. 52); so recently dejected and frightened, but now filled with ecstatic joy. As the Lord had said, “I will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice, and your joy no man taketh from you” (Jno. 16:22).

Awaiting his coming

Finally we stand with them on Olivet. A resurrected Lord stands alongside us, full of exhilaration that death has been conquered. The awesomeness of the Lord’s titanic struggle against sin has been realised at last, and the positive hope of the Kingdom has been firmly etched on our minds. The task now is to go out and

fight the good fight of faith, that salvation might spread around the world. The disciples' excited conversation must have been silenced as the Saviour granted them his blessing, then began to ascend out of their sight. And although we do not know to what part of the wide heavens our Lord passed, we can imagine the acclamations of joy that greeted him as legions of angels rejoiced and escorted him to the right hand of his mighty Father. Hallelujahs such as mortal men have never heard echoed around the throne of glory—praise not yet capable of being grasped by mortal men.

It may be, at this very moment, that great preparations are being made for the Lord's promised return. What a day for us to contemplate! And what a privilege to be there! On earth, two angels spoke a stimulating message to those left behind. How did they react? Were they dispirited because they were leaderless? Had dejection overwhelmed them at the thought of the work to be done? Not a bit. Luke emphasises their exuberance with one word: when they first met their risen Lord they could not believe for *joy*. When the Lord left them they were filled with great *joy*. That one word underlines their tremendous zeal and new-found confidence. They returned to the city of intrigue and murder with a new assurance. Their fearless

proclamation of a new creation rang around the city walls. They had a great heritage to share, for which we are grateful, and we share with all who will listen.

*Speed on, O God, the hour when, free from sin,
We'll rise, Thy sons of power, glorious within:
And, with Thy Christ confest,
Blessing and ever blest,
Rule o'er the earth at rest in the Amen.*

(Hymn 174)

That same joy is imprinted on our hearts. Death is defeated, and no amount of earth covering our lifeless bodies is an obstacle for Him Who created all things. The future is a glorious prospect: we can have no fear. We can reign with this unique man, a true King of kings and Lord of lords, serving the survivors of the judgements to come that they too may see the overwhelming mercy of God and share our precious heritage (Ps. 145:10-12). They will see that the Lord who had so humble a beginning will have no end, for, like the angels—and like us!—life will stretch into eternity. It will be a life of quality unlike anything that we have ever envisaged. How wonderful if, this very moment, an angel opened our door and said, "The Lord is here! Come, ye blessed of the Lord".