

CHAPTER 24: The Gospels Part 2

We hear the sound of a baby crying. We are presented with our first physical image of Jesus – a newborn baby. **While they were there [Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem], the time came for [Mary] to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped Him in strips of cloth and laid Him in a manger [a feeding trough for animals], because there was no place for them in the inn.** (Luke 2:6-7) Nobody in Bethlehem is aware of the significant birth that has just taken place in their little town. Well, not yet.

God is about to announce the birth of Jesus, but it will be made in the most unexpected way. This is just like God, isn't it? **Now there were shepherds nearby living out in the field, keeping guard over their flock at night.** (Luke 2:8) Notice the setting for God's big announcement – a dark rural Judean hillside. Not a crowded convention hall in a major city; not a palace; not a temple; not some huge gathering of important dignitaries. The only ones present this night to receive the wonderful news are a handful of shepherds who are guarding their sheep. That's all!

An angel of the Lord appeared to them [the shepherds], and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were absolutely terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid! Listen carefully, for I proclaim to you good news that brings great joy to all the people: Today your Savior is born in the city of David [Bethlehem]. He is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign for you: You will find a baby wrapped in strips of cloth and lying in a manger." (Luke 2:9-12)

This is the great news! It is the news that God's people have been waiting to hear for centuries! And for a reason known only to God, He chooses to announce it to a group of unknown, unnamed, seemingly unimportant shepherds in a field outside the small village of Bethlehem. But this news is so big, so exciting that heaven literally cannot contain itself... **Suddenly a vast, heavenly army appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among people with whom He is pleased!"** (Luke 2:13-14) This angelic host sings out their praises to God with unbridled joy. A heavenly brilliance lights up the night sky. It is an amazing scene!

The angels leave and once again the countryside is dark and quiet. The shepherds hurry into Bethlehem to see this "Savior" who has just been born. When they find the baby, everything is exactly as the angel had said. They relate to Mary and Joseph all

that the angel revealed to them about their baby boy. Mary treasures their words. She ponders in her heart all that these things could mean. The shepherds return to their field and flock glorifying and praising God for all they've seen and heard.

Eight days later Joseph and Mary take their newborn baby to the temple in Jerusalem, seven miles from Bethlehem. There Jesus is circumcised and officially given the name of Jesus. That's the name the angel Gabriel had told Mary when he first visited her (Luke 1) and the name the angel told Joseph (Matthew 1).

On the fortieth day, in accordance with Jewish law, Mary and Joseph take baby Jesus back to the temple for Mary's ritual purification and to present Him to the Lord. There in the temple they encounter a man named Simeon. He is a righteous man who has been waiting his whole life for the coming of the Messiah. The Holy Spirit directs Simeon to Jesus. Upon seeing the baby... **Simeon took Him [Jesus] in his arms and blessed God saying, "Now, according to Your word, Sovereign Lord, permit your servant to depart in peace. For my eyes have seen Your salvation that You have prepared in the presence of all peoples: a light, for revelation to the Gentiles, and for the glory to Your people Israel."** (Luke 2:28-32) Simeon basically tells God this: "I can die now because I have seen the Messiah!"

Simeon's testimony about Jesus is followed by another. This one is from a woman, an elderly prophetess named Anna. Like Simeon, she has been anticipating the Messiah for many years. When Anna sees Jesus she instantly recognizes who He is. **At that moment, she [Anna] came up to them [Mary, Joseph and the baby] and began to give thanks to God and to speak about the child to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem.** (Luke 2:38) The words of Simeon and Ana in the temple that day confirm for Mary and Joseph who their baby boy is.

Approximately a year passes. Jesus grows from an infant into a toddler. Mary and Joseph remain in Bethlehem rather than make the long journey back to Nazareth. They relocate into a house and settle down there. But God is about to reveal to them very clearly that the time for them to leave Bethlehem has come.

We are introduced to a group of wise men from Persia. These Gentiles have some knowledge of the Old Testament prophecies that date back to the time of Daniel. Remember that Daniel had been exiled to Persia and his influence was there. They are astrologers by trade who spend much of their time studying the stars. From the Scriptures they discover that a Jewish king is to be born. Furthermore, a most unusual star has grabbed their attention – a slow-moving star. Between the Scriptures and the star they conclude that this king of the Jews has been born.

These Persian astrologers are aware that something big has happened! They follow the star and it guides them toward the land of the Israelites. **After Jesus was**

born in Bethlehem in Judea, in the time of King Herod, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem saying, “Where is the one who is born king of the Jews? For we saw His star when it rose and have come to worship Him.” (Matthew 2:1-2)

Apparently this is news to everyone the wise men meet in Jerusalem for nobody is able to tell them where to look. Do you see the tragic irony of this? Gentiles from Persia are more aware of a fulfilled prophecy from Jewish Scriptures about the Messiah King of Israel than are God’s own people!

The word reaches King Herod, ruler of Judea that some wise men from Persia are searching for a king. This troubles Herod. And because Herod is troubled, so is all Jerusalem. Herod calls in the chief priests and scribes and asks them where the Messiah is to be born. Based on the Micah 5 prophecy we heard earlier, they tell the king – **“in Bethlehem of Judea.” (Matthew 2:5)**

Then Herod privately summoned the wise men and determined from them when the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and look carefully for the child. When you find Him, inform me so that I may go and worship Him as well.” (Matthew 2:7-8) But King Herod has NO intention of worshipping this new king.

After listening to the king they left and once again the star they saw when it rose led them until it stopped above the place where the child was. (Matthew 2:9) When the wise men see Jesus, they worship Him and offer Him expensive gifts suitable for a king – gold, frankincense, and myrrh. **And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way. (Matthew 2:12)**

When Herod realizes the wise men have “tricked” him (his own perception of the situation), he is furious. He orders that all male children under the age of two living in and around Bethlehem be killed. Herod hopes to eliminate this new rival king that he had been informed about. This tragic slaughter becomes known later as “the massacre of the innocents.” But Herod’s evil scheme to thwart God’s sovereign plan and to kill Jesus fails. You see, earlier that same day an angel had appeared to Joseph in a dream and warned him of Herod’s plan. So by now Joseph, Mary and young Jesus are well south of Bethlehem headed for the safety of Egypt. They remain in Egypt for a few years until King Herod dies. At that point God directs them back to their hometown of Nazareth.

All we are told about Jesus’s childhood over the next decade or so is this... **And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom, and the favor of God was upon Him. (Luke 2:40)** We can only speculate as many artists and writers have done about the details of young Jesus’s life growing up in Nazareth. But we don’t know for sure because the Bible doesn’t tell us.

Fast forward several years... **Now Jesus' parents went to Jerusalem every year for the feast of the Passover. When He was twelve years old, they went up according to custom.** (Luke 2:41-42) Joseph, Mary and Jesus travel to Jerusalem in the safety of a large group of pilgrims. When the weeklong Passover celebration is over they depart Jerusalem and head back home.

But when the feast was over, as they were returning home, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem. His parents did not know it, but (because they assumed that He was in their group of travelers) they went a day's journey. Then they began to look for Him among their relatives and acquaintances. (Luke 2:43-44) There is no sign of Jesus anywhere!

When they did not find Him, they returned to Jerusalem to look for Him. After three days they found Him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard Jesus were astonished at His understanding and His answers. (Luke 2:45-47)

Mary scolds Jesus for the distress He had caused her and Joseph. But He replies, **"Why were you looking for Me? Didn't you know that I must be in My Father's house?"** (Luke 2:49). Another translation states Jesus's response to His parents this way: **"Did you not know that I must be about My Father's business?"** In other words, "You should have known where I would be!" But His parents don't fully comprehend the significance of Jesus's words at this point.

Then He [Jesus] went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. But His mother kept all these things in her heart. (Luke 2:51) The remainder of Jesus' youth and early adulthood is summarized in one verse: **And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and with people.** (Luke 2:52)

The next time we see Jesus in the story, He is a full grown man, thirty years old. So, let's return to the scene that we opened up with back when we were first introduced to the Gospels...

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John to be baptized by him in the Jordan River. (Matthew 3:13) John the Baptist recognizes who Jesus is right away. **John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"** (John 1:29) John the Baptist is aware that Jesus is the Messiah King who has come to save His people. He points Jesus out to the crowd and tells them, "THIS is the one I have been telling you about!"

When Jesus presents Himself for baptism, John objects. **But John tried to prevent Him, saying, "I need to be baptized by You, and yet You come to me?"**

(Matthew 3:14). But Jesus insists. **So Jesus replied to him, “Let it happen now, for it is right for us to fulfill all righteousness.” Then John yielded to Him.** (Matthew 3:15)

Let’s clarify something about Jesus’s baptism. Why has John the Baptist out in the wilderness and what he was doing? He has been **preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.** (Mark 1:4) By submitting to John’s baptism, what Jesus is doing is identifying with all of those repentant sinners whom He came to save.

After Jesus was baptized, just as He was coming up out of the water, the heavens opened and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming on Him. And a voice from heaven said, “This is my one dear Son; in Him I take great delight.” (Matthew 3:16-17) Earlier we heard the angels declare who Jesus is. John the Baptist has declared who Jesus is. And now, God Himself speaks in an audible voice and declares who Jesus is!

Then John [the Baptist] testified, “I saw the Spirit descending like a dove from heaven, and it remained on Him. I have both seen and testified that this Man is the Chosen One of God.” (John 1:32-34). “Chosen One” is a term used for the Messiah. So then, at Jesus’s baptism God reaffirms to John that Jesus is in fact the Messiah that he has been preaching about.

Before Jesus formally begins His public ministry He undergoes a final test. **The Spirit immediately drove Him [Jesus] into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, enduring temptations from Satan. He was with wild animals, and angels were ministering to His needs.** (Mark 1:12-13) For nearly six weeks Jesus is out in the wilderness being tempted by Satan whom we have heard from before. Matthew and Luke refer to Satan as “the devil” (Matthew 4:1 and Luke 4:2).

So, what do we know about Satan? Back in Job 1 and 2 we saw where Satan had access to God, sneered at God and argued with God. God gave Satan permission to test, to prove righteous Job’s faith in God. We saw that Satan has certain powers but they were limited by God. In Zechariah 3 we saw where Satan accused Joshua, Israel’s high priest, of sin. But God turned around and rebuked Satan. So, Satan is an evil accuser and antagonistic toward God and God’s people. You wonder “Why does God allow Satan to hang around?” God uses Satan for divine purposes. In the case of Jesus, Satan is the agent of temptation that God allows to test Jesus. The way Jesus handles these tests will prove that He really is the Son of God.

Satan’s three recorded temptations of Jesus in the wilderness are prefaced with a taunt – “IF you are the Son of God...” Satan tries to provoke Jesus into using His divine powers to satisfy His own physical desires; to impress the crowds that He really is who

He claims to be; and to achieve earthly power and glory. In each case, Jesus answers Satan with an Old Testament scripture – “It is written...”

In the first temptation Jesus has had nothing to eat and is famished. **The devil said to Him [Jesus], “If You are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread.”** (Luke 4:3) Satan tries to force Jesus to act on His own word for His own personal benefit and apart from God’s word; which is why Jesus quotes from Deuteronomy 8... **But He [Jesus] answered, “It is written, ‘Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”** (Matthew 4:4) Everything Jesus does is only as directed by God and by God’s word.

In the second temptation Satan transports Jesus to Jerusalem. **Then the devil brought Him to Jerusalem, and had Him stand on the highest point of the temple, and said to Him, “If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down from here, for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,’ and ‘with their hands they will lift you up, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.’”** (Luke 4:9-11) Satan quotes Psalm 91 about God supplying angelic protection. But then Satan twists its meaning to test God to see if He will really protect Jesus as this psalm claims. The courtyard below is crowded with people. Satan tries to get Jesus to force God’s hand to act based on Jesus’ desires – the notoriety He would receive when the crowd witnesses a miraculous angelic rescue of Jesus – rather than Jesus acting on God’s desires. The fact is that God never directed Jesus to throw Himself down from the temple. But Satan knows that God would most definitely protect Jesus if He did jump.

For this reason Jesus quotes from Deuteronomy 6... **Jesus said to him, “Once again it is written: ‘You are not to put the Lord your God to the test.’”** (Matthew 4:7) Jesus’s actions always line up with God’s desires.

In the third temptation Satan literally offers Jesus the world. **Then the devil led Him up to a high place and showed Him in a flash all the kingdoms of the world. And he said to Him, “To You I will grant this whole realm – and the glory that goes along with it, for it has been relinquished to me, and I can give it to anyone I wish. So then, if You will worship me, all this will be Yours.”** (Luke 4:5-7) But Jesus knows that eventually He is going to receive all these kingdoms from God anyway.

[Slide 49] So Jesus says, **“Go away, Satan!”** Again Jesus quotes from Deuteronomy 6... **For it is written: ‘You are to worship the Lord your God and serve only Him.’** (Matthew 4:10) Jesus is GOD’S Son, not Satan’s!

Then the devil left Him, and angels came and began ministering to His needs. (Matthew 4:11) Jesus, having passed His final exam, now prepares to step out into His public ministry. The world will never be the same.

Over the next three and a half years Jesus will prove that He is, in fact, “the Son of God.” He does this through His preaching and teaching, by His actions, and in His many signs and miracles. Along the way Jesus challenges the religious establishment, the religious phonies of His day and those who oppose God. This sets up what will be an ongoing conflict between Jesus and the Jewish religious leaders who by and large reject Jesus’s claims.

A side note here: What is the whole purpose for the Jewish religious leaders? They are supposed to be God’s representatives. They are supposed to be teaching the people the law and telling them how God wants them to apply it to their lives in order to please God.

He [Jesus] came to what was His own, but His own people did not receive Him. (John 1:11) What a sad commentary! The people of Israel have waited centuries for their promised Messiah. He finally arrives on the scene and they don’t recognize or welcome Him. Instead they reject Him. And it starts with their religious leaders.

Most of Jesus’ early ministry happens in his home region of Galilee which is in the northern part of Israel. The geographical focal point of the region is the Sea of Galilee. Jesus will make several trips to Jerusalem and will visit various places surrounding Galilee. But primarily in the early days of His ministry, Jesus operates in Galilee. One of the first things Jesus does is select a group of disciples. These men will accompany Jesus on a daily basis. They will assist Him in spreading His message – the good news of the Gospel and the kingdom of heaven.

The first disciples to follow Jesus are two of John the Baptist’s disciples. Having heard all that John said about Jesus, they believed it. They turn from John and follow Jesus. **Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter, was one of the two disciples who heard what John [the Baptist] said and followed Jesus. He first found his own brother Simon and told him, “We have found the Messiah! (which is translated Christ). Andrew brought Simon to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, “You are Simon, son of John. You will be called Cephas (which is translated Peter).** (John 1:40-42)

Jesus then meets a man named Philip. **On the next day Jesus wanted to set out for Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, “Follow Me.” Philip found Nathanael and told him, “We have found the one Moses wrote about in the law, and the prophets also wrote about – Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.” Nathanael replied, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip replied, “Come and see.”** (John 1:43, 45-46)

So Nathanael goes and carries on a conversation with Jesus. While they are talking Jesus reveals details about Nathanael that only Nathanael would know.

Nathanael is amazed by this. **Nathanael answered Him, “Rabbi, You are the Son of God; You are the king of Israel!”** (John 1:49)

Over the next few months Jesus calls disciples to follow Him. Jesus is walking along the shore of the Sea of Galilee. He sees the same two fishermen we met earlier, Andrew and Peter. **Jesus said to them, “Follow Me, and I will turn you into fishers of people.”** (Mark 1:17). They immediately follow Jesus. A little further down the shore Jesus sees two brothers, James and John in their boat with their father mending their fishing nets. Jesus calls out to them, “Follow Me.” **They immediately left the boat and their father and followed Him.** (Matthew 4:22)

On one occasion Jesus sees a tax collector named Matthew (also known as Levi) at his tax booth. His job is to collect taxes for the Roman government. **“Follow me,” Jesus said to him. And he got up and followed Him, leaving everything behind.** (Luke 5:28)

Matthew throws a party in Jesus’s honor at his house and invites many of his tax collector friends. That’s when the Pharisees voice their first criticism of Jesus. **But the Pharisees and their experts in the law complained to [Jesus’] disciples, saying, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?” Jesus answered them, “Those who are well don’t need a physician, but those who are sick do. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.”** (Luke 5:30-32)

Jesus hand picks twelve disciples – Simon Peter; James and John, Andrew, Philip, Nathanael, Matthew, Thomas, James the son of Alphaeus, Thaddeus, Simon the Zealot, and Judas Iscariot. Jesus turns around to His small band of followers and says... **“I tell all of you the solemn truth – you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.”** (John 1:51) That term “Son of Man” will become Jesus’s favorite term for Himself. It comes from Daniel’s description of the Messiah in Daniel 7.

During the next three-plus years that they will spend with Jesus these twelve men are going to witness some pretty extraordinary things. We’ll get to that next.