

The Real Story of Christmas for Children

"Happy birthday to you! Happy birthday to you!..." Now why am I singing "Happy Birthday"? I thought this was supposed to be about the story of Christmas! Well, it is! You see, when we sing "Happy Birthday" to someone, we're thinking of the day when that person was born, aren't we? We're being glad they were born. Well, Christmas is the time that we think of the day when Jesus was born, about the birthday of Jesus. Of course, we should think about Jesus a lot of the time, but we can think about different things that have to do with Jesus, can't we? And at Christmas time we particularly think about when He was born, about the time of His birth, of His birthday.

Now, we don't actually know when the birthday of Jesus is. We don't know the exact year He was born, nor even the exact time of the year. But years ago people decided that they would especially think about the birthday of Jesus, about when He was born, have Christmas, on December 25th. Though even today, many people in some countries have Christmas, that is, they especially think about when Jesus was born, on January 7th instead of in December. But that is all right. Just so long as we think about Jesus!

Now, what are the first 6 letters of the word "Christmas"? That's right, C-h-r-i-s-t. And that spells "Christ", doesn't it? Christmas. Having to do with our Lord Jesus Christ. So today let's especially think about Jesus at the time He was born, the day of His birth.

Now, where can we find the story of the birth of Jesus? Yes, in the Bible, of course! But we only find it in 2 places in the Bible, in 2 books of the New Testament, in the book of Matthew and in the book of Luke. In the book of Luke, it tells about Jesus' mother Mary and what she did. And in the book of Matthew it tells about Jesus' stepfather Joseph and what he did.

Now, what was the name of the mother of Jesus? Yes, it was Mary. And the story of Christmas in the Bible starts out with Mary, telling that Mary was a young woman who was engaged to be married to Joseph, but they weren't married yet.

Both Mary and Joseph were descendants of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, and they were descendants of Judah, the son of Jacob. And they were both descendants of King David, but through different sons of David. This fulfilled some prophecies in the Old Testament. Remember, God had told Abraham and Isaac and Jacob that one of their descendants (one of their great-great-great-grandchildren) would be a blessing to the whole world, and that, of course meant Jesus Who would make a way for us to go to heaven some day. And then Jacob had prophesied that one of his son Judah's descendants would be the great king, and that meant Jesus, too. And then years later God had told King David that one of his descendants would sit on his throne forever. All of these prophecies were talking about Jesus, weren't they? But now let's talk about the story of Christmas.

In the book of Luke in the Bible we find out that Mary lived in a little town named Nazareth, and she wasn't married to Joseph yet when one day an angel named Gabriel suddenly came to Mary. Gabriel said to her, "Be happy! The Lord is with you! You are blessed among women!"

Well, what would you do if suddenly an angel came and started talking to you?! I know I would be very startled! And when Mary saw and heard Gabriel, she was very startled! It all sort of scared her. She thought, "What is going on here?! Why is he saying all of this?!"

And Gabriel said to Mary, "Don't be afraid, Mary! God is going to do something very special for you. You are going to have a son and name Him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Highest, and God will give him the throne of David. He will be king over the descendants of Jacob forever. His kingdom will never end!"

But Mary said, "How can this be! I don't have a husband yet!"

But Gabriel said to her, "God the Holy Spirit will make it so that you will have this special baby, and so He will be called the Son of God."

That would be a miracle that the Lord would do this. And this would fulfill a prophesy that had been given many hundreds of years before by Isaiah.

Then the angel Gabriel said, "And your old cousin Elizabeth, who couldn't have babies, is going to have a baby, too."

This was another miracle that the Lord had done, having Elizabeth be going to have a baby when she was too old. But that is another story, and we don't have time for it today.

But then Gabriel went on to tell Mary how these two miracles could happen. He said, "Nothing is impossible with God."

God can do anything, can't He?!

So Mary said, "I am willing to do whatever the Lord wants."

And then the angel Gabriel left Mary. And Mary got up and quickly made the long trip to see her old cousin Elizabeth. It probably took her a few days to get there. Anyway, when she got to Elizabeth's house, she greeted Elizabeth. And when Mary spoke, Elizabeth's baby jumped inside of her, and the Holy Ghost filled Elizabeth and she started shouting praises! God had let Elizabeth know that Mary was going to have a very special baby.

Elizabeth said, "You are blessed, and your baby is blessed! You are happy because you believed the Lord, and the Lord will do what He said."

Then Mary sort of sang a song of praise to the Lord, saying how great the Lord is and what great things He does. And Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about 3 months and then went back home to Nazareth. Elizabeth's baby was born, and he was named John. Later he was called John the Baptist, and when he grew up, he would tell people to turn from their sins and to believe in Jesus. But back to the story of the first Christmas.

Well, then in the book of Matthew we read that when Mary was back in Nazareth, that after a while, Joseph, the man she was engaged to marry, realized that Mary was going to have a baby. He was very upset. After all, they weren't married yet, and he knew that he wasn't the father of her baby. But Joseph was a kind and good man and didn't want to get her in a lot of trouble, so he just decided to quietly break their engagement, not to marry her.

But guess what happened then?! Why, while Joseph was thinking about doing this, one night when he was asleep, the angel of the Lord came to Joseph in a special dream. And the angel of the Lord said to him, "Joseph, don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife, to marry her. This special baby is from the Holy Spirit."

The angel of the Lord said, "Mary will have a son, and you will name Him Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins."

Well, Joseph woke up from this special dream, and he did as the angel of the Lord had told him to do and took Mary to be his wife. They got married.

Now at this time the Romans were ruling most of the world, including Israel where the Jews lived. The Roman emperor was named Caesar Augustus. And in the book of Luke we find out that Caesar Augustus sent out a law that everyone had to go back to where they came from and pay a tax. So, many people started traveling to go back to the towns where their families had come from. Two of these people were Mary and Joseph. They were going to have to go clear down to Bethlehem. And it was nearly time for Mary's special baby Jesus to be born, but they had to go anyway. So they went way down to Bethlehem, about 70 or so miles. Now that may not seem far to us now, but, remember, they didn't have cars then. So they either had to walk or ride on a donkey or maybe in a cart. The Bible doesn't tell us how they traveled, but it must have been hard for poor Mary!

Anyway, Joseph and Mary got to Bethlehem. This is the city where Ruth and Boaz had lived 1000 years before. (I told you about them another time, didn't I?) And this is where Ruth and Boaz's great-grandson the shepherd boy David had lived. David, who killed the giant Goliath and later became king of all Israel. Bethlehem later became known as the city of David. (Did you know that this same Bethlehem is still there in Israel now?!)

Well, as I just said, Joseph and Mary got to Bethlehem. And guess what? All the places to stay, the inns or hotels were full! So they went over to stay where the animals like cows were kept. And while they were there, little baby Jesus, the Son of God, was born. He was born in Bethlehem, which fulfilled a prophecy made by the prophet Micah hundreds of years earlier, that the Messiah, that is, the Christ, would be born in Bethlehem. (Remember, Messiah and Christ mean the same thing in 2 different languages.)

So Jesus was born. And what do you think they used for His crib? Why, Mary wrapped Him all up nice and warm in what is called swaddling clothes, and she tucked Him into a manger, the place where hay was put for the animals to eat! That wasn't fancy, but it made a nice warm bed for him, didn't it? But just think, here was Jesus, God the Son, the One Who had worked with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit to make the whole world and everything in it. And when He came to earth as

a human (though He was still God, too), the only little bed He had was in a manger!

But how did people find out about Jesus and that He was born? Well, later the Bible calls Jesus the Lamb of God. And the first people to hear about it when the Lamb of God was born were shepherds, men who took care of sheep and lambs! And this is how that happened.

You see, there were shepherds out in the field when Jesus was born, and that night they were watching their flocks of sheep. And suddenly in the dark there, the angel of the Lord came to these shepherds! And there was a very bright light, the glory of the Lord, and it shone all around them! And the shepherds were scared! But the angel said to them, "Don't be afraid! Look, I'm bringing you wonderful, happy news that is for everyone!"

The angel said, "Today there has been born in Bethlehem, the city of David, a Saviour, Who is Christ the Lord! And this will be a sign to you. You will find the baby all wrapped up in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger."

Then suddenly there was a whole big army of angels with this angel. And this big crowd of angels were all praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest!! And on earth, peace and good will to men!!"

Then the angels all left. And there were the shepherds standing in the dark night again! Think how excited they must have been!

So the shepherds said to each other, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see what the Lord has let us know about!"

So the shepherds hurried to Bethlehem, and they found Mary and Joseph, and they saw the baby Jesus lying in the manger, just like the angel had told them. And they began praising God, and then they went back to where they had been.

Now, shepherds are great talkers! And after they had seen the angels and then the special baby, they began telling everyone everywhere all about it. So lots of people heard about when Jesus was born and how the angel had told the shepherds about it and how they had actually seen Him.

But what did Mary think about all of this? We aren't told, except the Bible says that she remembered everything and thought a lot about it. And that is the story of the birthday of Jesus, of the day He was born. And that is what we celebrate at Christmas time.

But the Bible tells us some more about Jesus when He was a baby. Would you like to hear it? Okay, then, let's go on.

Well, the Jews had a special ceremony for boy babies when they are 8 days old, so Mary and Joseph had that done, and at that time they also gave the baby His name. What do you think they named Mary's special baby? Yes, that's right! Jesus, of course! Because that is what the angel had told each of them to do! And Jesus is the Hebrew name Joshua in a different language. It means "The Lord

Saves," because Jesus would later save people from their sins, wouldn't He?

Okay, the Jews had another special ceremony when babies were born, too. When a boy baby was 40 days old, he was to be taken to the temple in Jerusalem and a sacrifice given. And all first born boy babies were to be presented to the Lord there. This was all written in the law of Moses. So, of course, Joseph and Mary did this. And the sacrifice they took was two birds, like pigeons. This shows that they were poor, because richer people would sacrifice a lamb.

Anyway, they took the baby Jesus and went to Jerusalem, which wasn't too far away from Bethlehem where they were staying, just a few miles. And there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon. Simeon was a good man and loved the Lord very much. And some way the Holy Spirit had let Simeon know that he wouldn't die until he had seen the Messiah, the Christ, the promised One of God. And some way the Holy Spirit had Simeon go to the temple there in Jerusalem just at the time that Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus were there. And Simeon saw them, and he took baby Jesus in his arms and praised God. And Simeon said to God, "Now I'm ready to die, because I have seen the salvation that You have made." He was talking about that when this baby grew up that He would do something to save people from their sins.

Well, Joseph and Mary heard this, and they wondered about what Simeon had said. And Simeon blessed them. And Simeon told Mary that her baby would be very special.

Just then an old woman named Anna came in. She was a widow, and she worshipped God at the temple all the time. And Anna saw them, and the Lord let her know, too, that this baby was the Christ, the Messiah, the promised One of God. And Anna told everyone who was looking for the Messiah about Jesus.

Well, Mary and Joseph finished what they had come to the temple for, and then they went back home to where they were staying in Bethlehem. But they hadn't kept living in with the animals. No, they lived in a house.

Now, we read about the shepherds and Simeon and Anna in the book of Luke in the Bible. But then in the book of Matthew in the Bible we hear some more about when Jesus was still very little, probably only about a year old, something very exciting.

You see, one day some wise men came from somewhere in the East to Jerusalem. The Bible doesn't tell us how many there were or just exactly what they were or just where they were from, but they were important men. They had been traveling for quite a while to get there. And they began asking people, "Where is the one who was born King of the Jews? We saw His star in the East and have come to worship Him."

Well, remember that I told you that the Romans were ruling the Jews then? Well, the Romans had made a man who wasn't a Jew to be the king of Israel, king of the Jews there. This man's name was Herod, and he was a very great man but also a very wicked man. Well, Herod heard what the wise men were asking, about a King of the Jews who had been born, and he was very upset and worried. After all, he figured that he was the king there! He didn't want anyone else trying to be the

king! And other people in Jerusalem were worried, too.

So Herod got together the leaders of the Jews, the priests and teachers of the Jews. And Herod asked them, "Where is the Messiah, the Christ, to be born?"

Well, the priests and teachers knew that. After all, they had studied the Bible, and they knew what the prophet Micah had said hundred of years before. So they said to Herod, "Why, in Bethlehem of Judea. The prophets told about that."

Then King Herod privately called the wise men to him and carefully asked them when they had first seen the special star. After they told him, Herod said to them, "Go and look very hard for this young child. And when you have found him, come back and tell me so that I may go worship Him, too." (We'll find out in a minute, though, that the king was lying!)

After talking to the king, the wise men left and went out. And what do you think they saw? Why, they saw the special star again, the one they had seen when they were in their far away homes. They were very glad to see it again. But this was a very unusual star. It led them right to the house where Mary and Joseph and Jesus lived and then the star just stood there over the place!

The wise men went into the house and saw Jesus, probably about a year old, and they saw His mother Mary. And the wise men just fell down in front of Jesus and worshipped Him! And they had brought presents for Jesus, for this new little King. So they opened up the treasures they had brought for Him. They had brought 3 kinds of expensive gifts. They'd brought gold and frankincense and myrrh. Now, you know what gold is, don't you? It's a beautiful, expensive metal. But you may not know what frankincense and myrrh are, so I'll quickly tell you. Frankincense is something found on certain plants, something called "resin", sort of the hardened juice of the plant. It is used in making very fine incense and even sometimes as medicine. It was used in making the special incense for the Jewish temple, too. Myrrh is also resin, the hardened juice from a plant. It is used in very nice perfumes or as a special ointment. It was also used in making the special anointing oil for the Jewish priests. So these were very special, expensive gifts that the wise men brought, weren't they? They were truly gifts fit for a king!

Well, God warned the wise men in a dream that they should not go back to Herod. So the wise men obeyed God, and they went back to their homes another way.

After the wise men had left, the angel of the Lord came to Joseph, Mary's husband, in a dream. The angel of the Lord said to him, "Get up! Take the young child and His mother and run away to Egypt! And you stay there until I tell you to leave. You see, Herod will try to find the young child and kill Him!"

So Joseph got up that very night and took little Jesus and Mary and left for Egypt where they would be safe.

Well, just a few years later this wicked king Herod died. And then down in Egypt the angel of the Lord again came to Joseph in a dream. The angel of the Lord said, "Get up and take the young

child and his mother and go back to the land of Israel. Those who wanted to kill the young child are dead."

So Joseph got up and took Mary and Jesus, who was still a fairly little boy, and headed back into Israel. But when Joseph heard that Herod's son was now king in Jerusalem, he was afraid to go back to Bethlehem where they had been living. God appeared to him again in a dream, so Joseph took Mary and Jesus way back up to Nazareth where they had lived before Jesus was born, and they lived there.

And that is the end of the whole Christmas story.

We can see how God was working out His plan, can't we? And what was that plan? Well, first we need to remember, that Jesus is God as well as a man. Yes, Jesus helped create the whole world thousands of years ago before He came to earth as a human. But God the Father loves us so much that He had God the Son, Jesus, come to earth as a human being in order to make a way for us to be able to go to heaven and be with God someday. And God the Son, Jesus, did that for us. Jesus loves us very much.

And what is the way that we can go be with the Lord God forever someday? Well, remember, Jesus never did any sins at all. Even when He was here as a little boy, he never disobeyed his mother or stepfather or did any other sins. So Jesus didn't have any sins at all, did He? But we have all sinned sometimes, haven't we? No matter how hard we try to be good, we still sometimes sin. And because of those sins, we can't be able to be with God someday, right? But God loves us so much that Jesus came to earth and took our punishment for us so that we could be with God some day. You see, Jesus hadn't sinned at all, but He died on the cross for our sins. Then 3 days later, Jesus was alive again!! He was resurrected, wasn't He?! And that proved that He was able to make a way for us to go to heaven. And many people saw Jesus alive again. A little later He went back to heaven, and He's still alive in heaven today, isn't He? And God has promised that if we just believe in Jesus, trust in Him, He'll save us and be our King now! And then we'll be able to be with God forever. And someday Jesus will come back to earth to be King forever, just like God had promised King David and just like the angel had told Mary. And we'll be with Him. God always keeps His promises, doesn't He?!

So as you celebrate Christmas this year, think about Jesus and remember how much God loves us. If Jesus hadn't come to earth, been born, He couldn't have died for our sins, and then become the promised King for all who trust in Him, could He?

God loves us so very much!

So, "...Happy birthday, dear Jesus, happy birthday to you!"