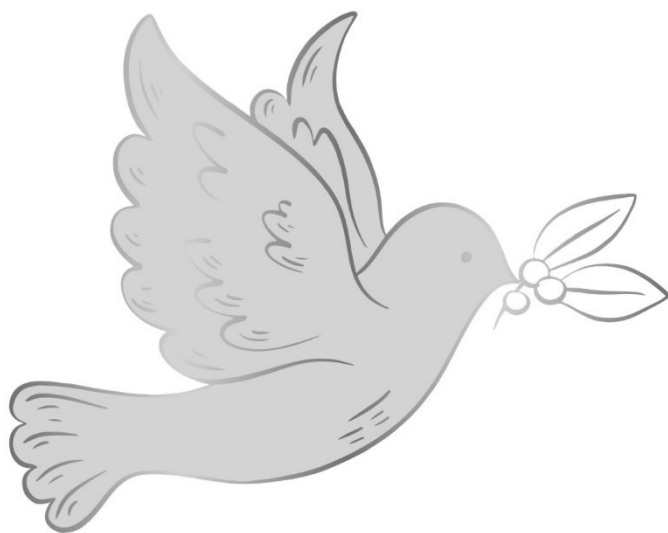


The Arrival of Emmanuel

A CHRISTMAS DEVOTIONAL INTO THE
BIBLICAL STORY OF THE BIRTH OF JESUS



SAMPLE CHAPTER



Bethel Grove Publications

The Arrival of Emmanuel: A Christmas Devotional into the Biblical Story of the Birth of Jesus (Sample Chapter)

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INTRODUCTION

I love traditions. During the holiday season, many wonderful traditions of gatherings with family and friends are revisited. From the games to the food to the movies, we love our holiday traditions and never get tired of them. We get comfortable with the way that we have always known things to be. We would never call these traditions into question and hope that they will never change.

For those of us that are Christians, many of our favorite traditions revolve around portraying or recounting the nativity story. I imagine that if you were to take a survey of the Christians in Western culture, most of them would probably tell you that they have a pretty good idea of what the birth of Jesus looked like. However, if you ask them to start describing it, many of the elements they would share, including the stable, animals, and an innkeeper, are not recorded in Scripture. In fact, if you take a serious look at how the Bible describes

the birth of Jesus, and compare it to how we portray it in our decorations, plays, and films, it becomes apparent that many of the details don't match.

You may be surprised to hear this. You are probably used to the nativity story most of us know today. We see it so often that it has become engrained into our minds. But it turns out that the finer details of the story, in many ways, came about like a large game of "telephone" that has spanned over 2000 years. Allow me to explain:

When most of us see a piece of artwork that is incomplete, our minds tend to fill in the gaps and guess what the rest was supposed to look like. We do the same thing when it comes to stories that don't explain all the finer details. The story of the birth of Jesus is a great example. This story does not have a lot of recorded details, which made it a prime candidate for unspecified details to be added later.

Without specific details to guide them, many early Christians tried to fill in the minor details to make the story work in their minds. However, there was already a cultural gap and passage of time that most of these Christians didn't acknowledge was there. As a result, they added elements to the story based on their misunder-

standing of biblical culture or assumptions they made from their cultural context. While these elements initially started as oral legends passed down for generations, some of the elements we are familiar with today were first recorded in writings known as the gnostic gospels. All gnostic gospels were written a few centuries after Christ and were most likely based on a mixture of the gospel stories and the previously mentioned oral legends. (This is supported by the fact that a few of these types of stories even ended up in texts like the Qu'ran¹). However, by recording them in a format like the real gospel accounts, their authors tried to pass them off as being equal to the real gospels. Because they were written hundreds of years after Christ, they are widely considered by biblical scholars to be inaccurate and heretical. However, many of the details the gnostic gospels presented, especially about the birth of Jesus, eventually polluted the narrative that was shared by the church.

Soon, another factor that would impact our knowledge of the birth of Jesus came about: the Dark Ages. During this time, there was only one church in the known world – the Roman Catholic Church. (Eventually in the eleventh century, there were two churches when the Eastern Orthodox church broke away from the Catholic church.) During this time, knowledge of the Bible was

largely lost, especially to the common people, due to a high rate of illiteracy and the Bible only being available in Latin, which was already a defunct language.

Even after the Protestant Reformation and the movement that followed to translate the Bible into the many languages of the world, many of the added details that were taught and portrayed during the Dark Ages were never separated from the narrative that is still continually shared by Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant churches alike. Combining that with the traditionalism and commercialism that became associated with the Christmas season over the last few centuries, you get the version of the nativity story we know today.

These factors can make it difficult for us to imagine the story any other way than what we are used to seeing and hearing at Christmas time each year. If we do, we tend to only take what is written in Matthew and Luke at the surface, and rely on tradition more than God's Word to help us fill in the details. In the process, we miss out on what God can teach us about faith and providence as it plays out in the real story of Jesus' birth. But for this to happen, you have to go back to the Scriptures first and let them guide you to the answers they provide.

When I realized this, I began to study the Scriptures and do research to determine the known facts about Jesus' birth versus what was added to the story later, as well as what these biblical story can teach us today. What I found was surprising and enlightening, and I think it will be for you as well, if you are will to look at the story from a different point of view.

For this devotional, I am going to start each chapter with a fictionalized summary of a portion of the story of Jesus' birth that is often misunderstood or misinterpreted. This will hopefully help you see that part of the story from a different perspective than the traditional narrative. I will also cite the Scripture verse(s) or passage(s) you should look up on your own time to help you confirm what is and isn't recorded in the biblical account. After this, I will break down the traditions about this part of the story and propose what was more likely to have happened based on Scripture and historical research. Then, I will end each section with a devotional thought based on the part of the story we were discussing. There will also be a few "Going Deeper" questions at the end of each chapter to help you reflect on the content further or discuss it with others.

Before we begin this journey, I have a few things I want to clarify. First, the fictionalized

summaries in each chapter are exactly that – fictionalized portrayals of what *might* have happened. They are not equal to Scripture and should not be viewed as such. However, these summaries have been based on years of studying the Scriptures and doing historical research. I hope that even though the ideas in these summaries may be surprising to you if you are used to the traditional story, I hope that you will read them with an open mind so that you can see this story in a way you haven't before.

Lastly, I want to state that I do not have all the answers. While I have done my due diligence in researching these topics, there are some things that we cannot know for certain, because the Bible or outside sources do not tell us. I will do my best to not make any absolute statements when addressing the traditional storyline unless the Scriptures are crystal clear. I will also state opinions of what was *likely* to have happened based on my research, but will do my best to clarify that it is an opinion rather than a proven fact. All I ask is that you come to this subject with a humble heart and open mind. It may be hard for you to let go of the way that you have always pictured these scenes. But if you do, it will allow you to see the birth of Jesus in a whole new way and bring you closer to the heart of why we celebrate His birth every year. Let's get started.



CHAPTER 1

THE FIRST TRIP

Scripture(s): Luke 1:26-56, Leviticus 15:19-30

Mary wasn't sure what she was going to do. She had just been visited by an angel that told her that she was going to be pregnant with God's Son. A million thoughts raced through her mind as she remembered everything the angel told her. She was honored that God chose her but scared of what might come as a result: What if Joseph didn't believe her? What would her parents say? Would Joseph divorce her?

As she thought about it, she remembered that the angel gave her a sign that God could do such a thing: her older relative Elizabeth, who was old and barren, was also expecting a child. She realized that this was her chance to go and see a promise of God fulfilled, like the one God had made to her. It would also give her time to figure out how she would tell Joseph and her family. So she went and

asked her father and Joseph for permission to go visit Elizabeth and Zechariah and quickly made preparations to leave the next day.

By the end of her journey four days later, Mary could tell that her body felt different. She felt sick in the mornings, but then felt fine in the afternoon, even after taking the long journey on foot. When she arrived at the house and knocked on the door, she was greeted by Zechariah, who smiled and motioned for her to come in, but didn't say a word. As she called out for Elizabeth, she heard a sound in the other room and then saw Elizabeth, who was expecting a child, just as the angel said. Elizabeth declared that she was blessed among women and explained that when she heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb. Mary then knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that God had chosen her and that He would do everything that He promised her. She may not have known exactly how the other details were going to work out, but for now, she knew that God's plan could be trusted. Elizabeth offered to let Mary stay for as long as she needed. She ended up staying for three months.



MARY SPENT HER FIRST TRIMESTER OF HER PREGNANCY WITH ELIZABETH

While this is a detail that is mentioned in Scripture, a lot of people miss the reasons that Mary went on this trip in the first place, as well as the reasons she chose to spend that length of time with Elizabeth.

When the angel told Mary she was going to have a baby, she was puzzled at the thought of being pregnant while still being a virgin. She knew that for a baby to be created, a man and a woman have to have sex, and this should only happen when they are married. But the angel was telling her that she was basically going to wake up the next morning and just be pregnant. To confirm that God could do something like this, the angel told her that her older barren relative Elizabeth was also expecting. Since God had promised to do this great thing for her, she probably wanted to see another promise of God fulfilled to be sure it was possible.

For it wasn't until after she saw that Elizabeth was pregnant that she rejoiced over the fact that God had chosen her. That was her first motivation to take this trip.

The second motivation was to have some time and space to make it through her first trimester and figure out how she was going to explain her pregnancy to her family. If she had chosen to stay home, her family would have figured it out much sooner because of her pregnancy symptoms and her missing monthly period.

Back in Bible times, women did not have effective ways to stay clean during their period. A woman had to spend at least a week sitting on rags and being considered unclean until she took a bath and offered the required purification offering (Leviticus 15). She would have been confined to a certain area of their tent or house. No one was even allowed to touch her, or they would become unclean themselves. After it was over, she probably would have needed to wash her own rags if she couldn't afford to buy new ones. So if a woman was on her cycle, *everyone* knew she was on her cycle. If she missed her cycle, it wouldn't take long for everyone to figure it out and come to conclusions about the reason why.

Mary knew she was not ready to face this yet. After all, she was still processing what was happening to her. She knew she needed time to prepare herself for what she would face when she returned to Nazareth. She may have also spent time asking Elizabeth questions about pregnancy and childbirth that she couldn't ask her mother. She may have even stayed long enough to witness the birth of baby John, both to see the fulfillment of a promise of God and give her an idea of what to expect during childbirth. This visit would encourage her and prepare her for what she would face during the following six months and beyond.



This part of the story reminds us that while Mary was scared about the uncertainty of the future, she also believed that God could and would fulfill all His promises, including the ones He made to her. When we face difficult or uncertain circumstances, we tend to forget the promises of God. However, those are the exact moments when we need to not only remember but cling to and act

on the promises God gives us in His Word. While God probably won't send an angel to give you a personal promise, there are plenty of promises in God's Word that you can memorize and hold onto during any season of your life when you feel scared or uncertain about what lies ahead.

As I think about the Christmas season, I like to reflect on the promise that would be fulfilled when Jesus came to Earth. He was given the alternative name Emmanuel, which means "God with us." Think about it. Before Jesus came to Earth, the only way you could be close to God was to go to the Tabernacle and eventually the Temple, and even then, only the High Priest could enter the Holy of Holies. Through Jesus, God is now *with* us. That's a powerful truth that we should never forget, especially when we face difficult circumstances.

Mary knew that God would fulfill everything He promised her. Do you?

GOING DEEPER

1. What do you think would have been going through Mary's mind after the angel left her?
2. How do you think Mary would have felt when she saw Elizabeth?
3. Do you think that Mary may have had other reasons for visiting Elizabeth?
4. Do you struggle with remembering God's promises when things are difficult? Why or why not?
5. What steps can you take today to remember God's promises in any season?

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