

Why
the nativity?

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INTRODUCTION



*I*t's early December, and we're driving home after a tiring day. Stopping at a traffic light at the intersection of Main Street, we have to smile. The town has placed its decorative lights along the parkway, and they shine red and green. The pharmacy window offers a soapy *Season's Greetings* written in red and white candy-cane letters. Several finely manicured trees bear wired lights, and they seem to complete the cheerful scene.

Christmas. As hectic as it has become, we enjoy the inevitability of the season that punctuates each passing year. It brings back those old favorite songs for another encore. We visit extended families and enjoy parties with our friends. As our world keeps roaring into an uncertain future, Christmas is a kind of security blanket that connects us to the past.

The traffic light is green, and we turn onto Main Street. There's the courthouse, dark and empty after another day of civic business. Yet the front lawn offers

illumination. As we pass the old World War I statue, we see what is lit: a colorful tableau with the facsimile of a stable, just a bit smaller than life, and the sculpture of a young woman dressed in the ancient garb of the Middle East, who is leaning over to see her baby.

The child sleeps in a little trough, and there are several plaster animals nearby: a donkey, a sheep or two, a cow. The father is there, too, along with a few characters who appear to be shepherds and wealthy Arabian dignitaries, bearing gifts. And above all these things we see the figures of several angels, lit by spotlight and apparently singing.

We drive more slowly as we approach, wanting to take in the spectacle. It's a manger scene, of course. Who wouldn't recognize the familiar characters from the Christmas story? Many of us dressed up as shepherds and wise men once ourselves, gracing the holiday pageants of our schools and churches.

But some other stray thought is causing us to take a second look at the courthouse display. Wasn't there something in the newspaper about this Nativity scene? Yes—we remember now. Some local citizens are protesting the use of the decoration. They say religious imagery should not be displayed on government property. In opposition, of course, are a few pastors and businesspeople who claim that this is a town tradition and that this quiet scene has never offended anyone before.

There's also some kind of hullabaloo over whether stores can have Christmas trees or whether they should be called "holiday trees." Now that we come to think of it, there seem to be strong emotions on every side of this issue of Christmas and the Nativity story. What could possibly

be so controversial about Mary and Joseph and their baby? They are simply icons to many people—part of a religious education recalled from childhood, figures on a Christmas card from an old friend. Why the Nativity?

On some impulse, we pull the car over to a parking meter and step into the chilly air. We walk over to the Nativity scene on the courthouse lawn and reflect carefully on what lies before us. For the first time, certain questions suggest themselves. Why was this child born in a stable? Why the shepherds, the angels, the wise men? Why was this woman, Mary, chosen to become one of history's most famous and beloved figures? And what about Joseph?

Most of all, there are questions about the little Child at the very center of the tableau. His birth was, what, two thousand years ago? Jesus was his name, and he was a poor man. From sometime in the past you can remember a short essay about him that said this man never traveled outside his own country, never held an office or had a family, and never wrote a single book. Yet it went on to say that all the armies, navies, and kings in history never affected the world as much as this “one solitary life.”

Is that true? And if so—*why*?

In this little book, we'll set forth on a quest for answers to that question. It will require doing just what the



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shepherds did, just what the wise men did, and even what Joseph and Mary did. We need to travel to Bethlehem. Though many years have gone by, and that stable is long gone, we need to concentrate our gaze through the mist of time and look upon that Child whom the shepherds adored. We need to answer all the questions that come to mind about this historic event, which is so dear to the hearts of so many people.

Then, having considered questions about the event itself, we will be left with a final one: *Why should we care?* What does Jesus mean to us? Does the beauty and truth of the Nativity need to be displayed in our own lives, as it is displayed on that courthouse lawn? Or is it just another historic event, just another ancient superstition, a leftover fairy tale from childhood? Let's be prepared to ask the questions, and to find honest and satisfying answers.

This journey will take us to a faraway place and to a time that might otherwise be forgotten. We will need to know a little about the nation Jesus came from, about the Romans who occupied Israel. We'll learn a little more about shepherds and those intriguing wise men.

Let's set our course, then, for two millennia ago—the dividing point of history. The scene is a little town on the quiet landscape of Judea. There are rumors of a miracle happening in the night. Are you ready to investigate?

The shepherds said, "Let's go to Bethlehem! Let's see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about" (Luke 2:15). Consider this your invitation to a remarkable journey to a moment of wonder, deep in the bygone days of the Roman Empire. Are you ready to travel?



Question 1

WHY THE PROPHECIES?



*T*ime is a mystery. We live each day immersed in it, so we cannot imagine a life outside of it, looking in. Time marches by us, moment by moment and year by year. It leaves its mark upon us more than we leave our mark upon it.

Imagine standing several miles from a great mountain range. You admire the majestic chain from its foothills in the west to the last outcroppings in the east. But if you didn't have that separation—if you were standing on one of the mountains—you would see only the scenery that was right around you.

God watches over us from outside the straight mountain range that is time. He sees past, present, and future in one unbroken line. And as long as we are travelers through this life, climbing from one slope to the next, we lack his perspective—with one exception, that is: the men and women known as the prophets.

God gives many amazing gifts. To some he gives a surplus of wisdom, to others a specially loving heart. And some have received from him the sight to perceive certain shapes in the mist of the future. Those with this gift have always been people obedient to God and to his purposes. Why would he let them see what was to come? Because he loves us, and he wants us to know what lies ahead, whether for our encouragement or as a sober warning. A prophet's central mission, as a matter of fact, is not to predict but to preach. He speaks more of the present than the future.

Even so, the Old Testament prophets spoke frequently about a coming champion. Every page, from Genesis to Malachi, seems to tremble with the wondrous anticipation of his coming. The books were written by many different writers, at various times over many centuries. What bound the readers and writers together was their identity as a special people that God truly cherished. Through that particular nation, a small one called Israel, God's plan was to let the whole world know of his love.

But that nation encountered times of grief and despair. Because the Israelites occupied one of the most contested areas in all the world, they were frequently under attack by tribes and empires—by the Philistines, then the Babylonians, and finally the Romans. Their walls and homes and Temple were built, destroyed by enemies, and rebuilt.

Finally, Israel became a dying nation, filled with confusion and doubt. It was against that scene that the great age of the prophets came. Many of the Jewish people had been carried away into slavery. Some had lost their sense of national identity in exile. Many were cynical, faithless, embittered. Everyone yearned for the great days of the

kings—David and Solomon and all their glory. And it was here that the prophets—men such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Micah—urged the people to keep the faith. Their message was, *Wait for one more king. This one will be the greatest of all, and he will end our struggle forever.*

Just when people most needed hope, God sent spokesmen to offer a foretaste of a better future. Throughout the words and work of the prophets, there were glimmers of a savior—a king who would rescue his people and restore them to God. In fact, there were more than three hundred specific prophecies in the Hebrew scriptures about the promised “Messiah,” as they called him.

The hints were tantalizing. Isaiah said that this special deliverer would be born of a virgin (see Isaiah 7:14). What kind of man could he be?

Micah, too, offered a prediction that was specific and startling. He said that the king would be born in the town of Bethlehem. That prophecy reads, “You, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, are only a small village among all the people of Judah. Yet a ruler of Israel will come from you, one whose origins are from the distant past” (Micah 5:2). Again, it was clear that the Messiah would be one who was not confined by the bounds of time. He would come “from the distant past.”

There are references to a ministry of teaching, healing, and miracles. This would be a man who would enjoy public



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favor, then finally be “despised and rejected—a man of sorrows, acquainted with deepest grief” (Isaiah 53:3). There are surprising references to crucifixion by a writer who had never witnessed such a thing (see Psalm 22).

Isaiah would conclude, “He was pierced for our rebellion, crushed for our sins. He was beaten so we could be whole. He was whipped so we could be healed” (Isaiah 53:5). The people of Israel could hope for a better time, including forgiveness by the God they had abandoned. The coming king would prove that God had never abandoned *them*.

Most amazing of all was the coming Messiah’s mission. God said, “You will do more than restore the people of Israel to me. I will make you a light to the Gentiles, and you will bring my salvation to the ends of the earth” (Isaiah 49:6).

Can you see the picture that emerges? It was as if many different artists had drawn strange squiggles on paper separately—only to find that when their fragments of art were combined on a single canvas, there was a beautiful portrait of a king we would come to know as Jesus Christ.

Nearly all of the more than three hundred prophecies have already come true (a few remain for our future). Jesus was all that had been foretold, and so much more. One mathematician determined that the odds of one person’s fulfilling even sixty specific prophecies are 1 in 1 plus 157 zeros.

Why the prophecies? They show us that even as Jesus was fully a human being like us, he was also “one whose origins are from the distant past.” By reading the prophecies we see the entire mountain range in a breathtaking glance;

we behold a magnificent God who works his purposes out through the march of time, patiently but faithfully, down to the smallest detail. We know that this is a God who can be trusted, and this is a Messiah who fulfills every hope in our hearts.

Discussion Questions

- ☉ Does knowing that Jesus' birth fulfilled prophecies made hundreds of years beforehand affect your life? In what ways?
- ☉ Which of the six specific prophecies mentioned in this chapter seems the most amazing to you? Why?

For further study: Read the following pairs of Scriptures to discover more prophecies that were fulfilled in Jesus' first advent: Isaiah 9:7 and Luke 1:32-33; Isaiah 53:12 and Matthew 27:38; Zechariah 6:13 and Hebrews 7:24-25.