

The Rebirth Of Hope #1

Human Responses to God's Intervention

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I. Introductory Remarks.

As we begin to focus our thoughts on the birth of Christ this Christmas season, I would like to speak to you from the first few chapters of Luke's Gospel in the next couple of weeks. Luke's Gospel provides many details about events associated with the birth of Christ. We find:

- The birth of John the Baptist foretold
- The birth of Jesus foretold
- Mary's hymn of praise
- The birth of John the Baptist
- The birth of Jesus
- The witness of the Shepherds
- Jesus presented as an infant at the temple
- Jesus as a boy visiting the temple
- The ministry of John the Baptist

In these first few chapters the theme that emerges is the "Rebirth of Hope". God was about to burst into this world of men. Jesus was about to be born, and after His birth our world, despite all its poverty and injustice, wars and terrorists, has never been the same. Jesus brought forth a rebirth of hope for mankind.

In this message today I want to look at two of the people who were involved in God's greatest intervention with mankind and what their responses were to His intervention. But first let's look into the background of this world that Jesus burst into.

II. Background of Jesus' Birth.

1. It Was A Time Of Expectation.

This was a time of expectation and hope for the nation of Israel, but little did they know this was also a time for the hope they would be experiencing to be granted to the whole world as well. It was a time prophesied by the prophets of the Old Testament.

Matthew 4:15-16 "The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles: the people who sat in darkness saw a great light, and upon those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned."

- **The coming of John the Baptist foretold.**

Isaiah 40:3-4 *The voice of one crying in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. {4} Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low; the crooked places shall be made straight, and the rough places smooth...*

Malachi 4:5 *Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD.*

Luke reported that an angel told Zacharias, John's father, that the son to be born to him will go on before the Lord, in the "spirit and power of Elijah".

Luke 1:17 *"He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, 'to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children,' and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."*

- **The Virgin Birth was foretold.**

Isaiah 7:14 *"Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel.*

Mary conceived by the Holy Spirit, so that the Child Jesus was "the Holy One" who must be identified as "the Son of God".

Luke 1:35 *And the angel answered and said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God.*

These prophecies and others filled the nation of Israel with an expectation of hope even though they were under bondage to the Roman Empire, that extended over the whole of the Western world.

2. Possible Headlines at the Time of Christ's Birth.

Had there been newspapers in the Roman Empire almost 2,000 years ago, some of the headlines that month might have been:

- King Artaxus Near Death
- Grain Ship Docks, Rome Riots End
- Nine Pirate Ships Sunk By Sixth Fleet
- Athens's Students Clash With Police
- Olympic Wrestler Still In Coma
- Report Of Angels Sighted In Judea

Such headlines look very much like the headlines in our newspapers today. For

the world of the New Testament was a world very much like ours. There were wars. There was sickness. There was poverty and injustice. There were people who struggled to keep on living, living by habit long after they had lost any sense of purpose, meaning, or goal.

It was a world like ours, populated with people like ours. But God had made preparations. God was about to burst into this world of men. Jesus was about to be born, and after His birth our world, despite all its poverty and injustice, wars and terrorists, has never been the same.

3. Their World at the Time of Christ.

Why would God choose to intervene? God has never desired the kind of world men have made. The Bible tells us that God worked carefully with men. Yet when "He looked for justice, He saw bloodshed; for righteousness, He heard cries of distress."

Isaiah 5:7 For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are His pleasant plant. He looked for justice, but behold, oppression; for righteousness, but behold, weeping.

Even the people of Israel, who had been given prophets to declare God's law and guide them into His ways, had twisted life out of shape. In their self-willed ways, they too had cheated one another, lied, and tried to use each other. As a result their lives fell under the control of sin living empty and frustrated lives. During Noah's time God chose to destroy the world because of sin, but this time He chose to send a savior.

As a result God judged the sin of His people as History records a series of defeats and years of foreign captivity. Even though at the time of Christ they were living in their own land, God's people were crushed under the weight of the Roman Empire.

Rome had brought world peace--but with peace came heavy taxes, armies of mercenaries stationed in every land, Roman culture and values, the gladiatorial games, slavery--and misery. There were still wars. There was still poverty and injustice. People still struggled to live, and kept on living by habit long after they had lost all sense of purpose or meaning in life. Theirs was a world that had run out of hope. The promised coming of the Messiah represented to them the "Rebirth of Hope".

Not all the power of Rome, nor the progress of our modern technology, have been able to satisfy the basic need all people share to find life's meaning.

Neither Rome nor computers have been able to break the bondage of sin that constantly expresses itself in individual life and society.

But something unique was about to happen in an insignificant province in Rome's wide-spread empire. the birth of a Baby would do what no authority or invention of man could. One day that Babe, full grown would say, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full"

In the birth of Jesus, God acted decisively to bring new life to individuals and transformation to human cultures. In the person of Jesus, God has extended humanity an invitation to new life and given them a rebirth of hope.

To every person who lives by habit, without direction or meaning or real hope--to you and me--Jesus' birth offers a fresh newness, a life turned around and transformed by the power of God. With this in mind let's look at two very different responses to God's involvement with mankind that illustrate to us how the rebirth of hope is realized when we believe with simple childlike faith.

III. Responses to God's Intervention.

The Old Testament foretold the coming of a day when God would step into this world of darkness to bring light and hope. A Child would be born, a Son given, and that One would bear the name Immanuel, "God with us."

Isaiah 9:6 *For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*

Matthew 1:23 *"Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel," which is translated, "God with us."*

1. Zacharias' Response and Reaction - Luke 1:5-25.

Zacharias was a priest who lived in a little hillside town in Judea, except for the two weeks a year when his shift was on duty at the Jerusalem temple. It was during this time that Zacharias was visited by an angel and given the announcement that his wife would bear a very special son.

Luke 1:18 *And Zacharias said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is well advanced in years."*

Zacharias's response to this announcement was one of hesitation and doubt. "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years."

Zacharias's doubt was based on his understanding of nature!

Many of us often hesitate to believe for the same reason. Answer my prayer? "Well, the way things usually turn out..." We think there must be a natural way for God to answer our prayers rather than an unusual way. God is not bound or restricted to the usual, or by the merely natural. Our God is a God of the unusual, and the sooner we see God as He is, the more quickly our lives will be transformed.

2. Mary's Response to God's Intervention - Luke 1:26-38.

Like Zachariah, Mary was startled and upset at the angel's appearance and his greeting. But, reassuring Mary of God's love, the angel told her she would have a Son. This Child would be the "son of the Most High." Like Zacharias, Mary too blurted out a question. "How will this be, since I am a virgin?"

Luke 1:34 Then Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I do not know a man?"

To this response the angel quoted the Old Testament prophecy from Isaiah 7:14, "A virgin shall bear a child, and you shall call His name Immanuel". There was to be no human father. The power of the Holy Spirit was to overshadow and impregnate her with the germ of life, and the child to be born would be God the Son.

Luke 1:35 And the angel answered and said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God.

To this explanation Mary had only one response. "I belong to the Lord, body and soul, let it happen as you say". (Phillips Translation)

Mary responded to God's intervention with such beautiful childlike faith. Zechariah, godly and mature had doubted the possibility of birth because of his age. Mary, a young girl, still in her teens, never hesitated or doubted a supernatural birth, though she was single.

There is a blessing to those who learn to believe in spite of doubt. There is a blessing for those of us who respond as Mary did with perfect, childlike faith. There is a rebirth of hope.

Mary's faith-response is even more striking when we realize that, according to Old Testament Law, her pregnancy while still single might well be dealt with by

stoning! And Joseph, who would know the child was not his, would hardly go through with the marriage. Yet all these things Mary was willing to trust God to work out!

Instead of worry, joy filled Mary's heart, and she was filled with a song of praise for God with a vivid awareness of His greatness and love. What was Mary's vision of God?

- He has done great things - vs 49.
- Holy is His Name - vs 49.
- His mercy extends to those who fear Him - vs 50.
- He has performed mighty deeds - vs 51.
- He has lifted up the humble - vs 52.
- He has filled the hungry - vs 53.

Mary knew God as a God of power and a God of concern, the One who cares enough for the humble and the hungry to reach down and to meet human need. She had a clear vision of who God is. She knew Him as a God who cares... who cares enough to act. May we each know God so well!

IV. Concluding Remarks.

My prayer for each one of us here today is that we would all learn how to cast aside all of our doubts and fears and learn to trust in God with a simple childlike faith that Mary possessed. As we do we will experience a continuous rebirth of hope in each of our lives.

Jesus' birth offers a fresh newness, a life turned around and transformed by the power of God. In the birth of Jesus God has acted decisively to bring new life to you and transformation to human cultures. In the person of Jesus, God has extended an invitation to new life and give us all a rebirth of hope.

May the God of hope fill you with His love and joy during this Christmas season. God bless you all!