

Not, “When?”

“Now in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth. This was the first census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. And everyone was on his way to register for the census, each to his own city. Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David, in order to register along with Mary, who was engaged to him, and was with child. While they were there, the days were completed for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son; and she wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn” (Luke 2:1–7).

One unexpected thing about Jesus’ birth is the absolute silence of the Scriptures concerning the date. The only thing we know for sure about the date of it is that He was not born December 25 in the year A.D. 1! It was some six centuries after the birth of Jesus before any attempt was made to reckon history from that event. Dionysius Exiguus, with what data he had, worked backward and fixed what he thought was the date of His birth. However, his calculations, which are even now reflected in the Christian calendar, have proven to be incorrect. As best we can tell, he should have gone back four or five years earlier in his reckoning.

In spite of the examination of the evidence for two thousand years by the best religious scholars among us, we still have to say that the day of His birth is unknown to us. In fact, we do not know the day, the month, or the year of His birth! We can get close to the year, but there still remains confusion concerning the exact year. The best guess is that it must have been what we identify as 4 or 5 B.C.

All of this brings to us an important realization: God did not see fit to emphasize the date of our Lord’s birth. Had He wanted to do so, He would have told us clearly what day it was. Instead, He wrapped the date of Jesus’ birth in obscurity. Apparently, He wanted us to think of His Son’s coming into the world in a much higher way.

This fact of our being unable to know the time of this miraculous birth must have significance. What is it?

When it comes to the birth of Jesus, the ques-

tion is not “When?” but “What?” Surely, God intended that we think of His coming as far more than a birth. What really happened when Jesus was born?

Two vague references concerning the time of His birth are given in the Scriptures: Luke 2:1, 2 and Galatians 4:4, 5. Luke wrote, “Now in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth. This was the first census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria.” Luke’s statement reminds us that he dated the great events of God’s works by connecting them with the rulers of the time. His technique of giving us a reference point at least brings us to “those days,” a general, non-specific time concerning Jesus’ birth.

Paul, in Galatians 4:4, 5, took the thought of His birth to the high level of God’s eternal purpose. He wrote, “But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.” In this way, he pictured Jesus’ birth as being not so much related to the calendar as to the fulfillment of the plan of God.

From the beginning of time, God had set out to put into place His great, overarching plan for man’s redemption. This “eternal purpose,” as Paul called it (Ephesians 3:11), stretches from eternity past to eternity future. It connects God’s pre-vision to His revelation and the enactment of His plan. God’s great purpose is the canopy under which His creation of the world, His

beginning of the human race, and the sending of His kingdom reside.

God waited until the proper time to put this great plan into place. He made sure the world had been carefully taught through the law of Moses, that man had become conscious of what sin is and what it does, and that the physical circumstances were in readiness for the coming of His Son and the redemption that He would bring.

The arrival of Jesus in Bethlehem was more than a birth; it was the setting into place, the bringing into the world, of the plan formulated by the council of heaven for the salvation of mankind. Therefore, the more meaningful truth is not “when” was He born, but “what” was born by His coming.

The important question about His birth is not “When?” but “Who?” The truth about Jesus’ coming is that He, God, became man. He was clothed with human flesh. God became one of us.

Jesus was, is, and always will be the Son of God; but with His earthly advent, He became the Son of Man. He walked among us. People saw Him in their homes, in the temple, on the road, and in the marketplace.

The big truth that must be believed about Christianity is that Jesus, God, became human like us. Who was this One who was born of Mary? The baby was the second member of the Godhead! J. I. Packer captured this giant truth in one paragraph, saying, “The really staggering Christian claim is that Jesus of Nazareth was God made man. . . . He took humanity without loss of deity, so that Jesus of Nazareth was as truly and fully divine as He was human.”¹ If one can believe this part of Christianity, he will have no trouble believing the rest of it. Packer continued,

“The Word was made flesh” (John 1:14); God became man; the divine Son became a Jew; the Almighty appeared on earth as a helpless human baby, unable to do more than lie and stare and wriggle and make noises, needing to be fed and changed and taught to talk like any other child. And there was no illusion or deception in this: the babyhood of the Son of God was a reality. The more you think about it, the more staggering it gets. Nothing in fiction is so fantastic as is this truth of the incarnation.

¹J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity Press, 1973), 46.

. . . It is from misbelief, or at least inadequate belief, about the incarnation that difficulties at other points in the gospel story usually spring. But once the incarnation is grasped as a reality, these other difficulties dissolve.²

The coming of Jesus was far greater than just a physical birth; it was that moment between the two eternities when God became a human being and began His redemptive life among us. John began his Gospel Account with a discussion of this profound and unforgettable truth:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being (John 1:1–3).

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth (John 1:14).

For of His fullness we have all received, and grace upon grace. For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ. No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him (John 1:16–18).

Perhaps the greatest truth that our minds will ponder in this life is the truth that the second member of the Godhead became a man, walked among us, and took our sins upon Himself at the cross. The Old Testament anticipates this event, and the New Testament explains it and shows the results of it. To reduce Jesus’ coming to a physical birth is to miss the magnitude of this event. No, it is not the question of “When?”; it is the question of “Who?”

In addition, we should not ask the question “When?” but “Why?” Why did all of this happen? What is its glorious meaning? For what reason did God visit this planet?

The coming of Jesus is all about our salvation. Mary was told, “And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus” (Luke 1:31). Joseph was likewise told, “She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for *He will save His people from their sins*” (Matthew 1:21;

²Ibid.

emphasis mine).

Jesus' incarnation was necessary for God to provide salvation from our sins and bring us back to living with Him and for Him. Jesus was made man, the writer of Hebrews said, so that He could "taste death for everyone" (Hebrews 2:9). He came into this world to be the ultimate and complete sacrifice for our sins. God cannot die, but man can and does die. Therefore, Jesus was made a little lower than the angels so that He might die for us. He had to become one of us to be able to offer Himself for us. His redemptive purpose in this world required a physical body and a physical death.

Jesus was also made man so that He could share in our trials. God wanted the quality of human perfection in the Savior who would redeem us (Hebrews 5:8, 9). This was the sinlessness that God demanded. As God, Jesus could have come into this world in any one of a number of ways. Two verses, Hebrews 2:14 and 4:15, tell us why He became human.

Hebrews 2:14 says, "Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil; and might free those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives" (2:14, 15). Hebrews 4:15 says, "For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin" (4:15). After He had faced the tempter successfully, Jesus was then qualified to be our perfect Savior. "And having been made perfect, He became to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation" (Hebrews 5:9).

"But why," we may want to ask, "did one of the members of the Godhead have to come?" Could God not have sent an angel to fulfill this task? This question brings us to another part of the equation. God sent Jesus, God the Son, so that He could bear the immeasurable weight of the world's guilt. No angel or mere man could have borne the weight; no one else could have expressed divine love as Jesus did.

There is no question about it: Christ could have sent an angel to take His place. However, no angel could have carried our sin's guilt. Further, angels cannot die. An angel would have been neither strong enough to bear the punishment of our sin nor capable of dying for us. In the face of God's righteous judgment, no angel would have been competent to act as a substitute for sinners or to express God's great love for us. Jesus, being actual Deity (God the Son), and having actually become human (the Son of Man), could bear the sins of the world and demonstrate the indescribable love of God. Christians sing,

No angel could His place have taken,
Highest of the high tho he;
The loved One on the cross forsaken,
Was one of the Godhead three!³

What, then, have we learned? As we formulate the list of questions we ought to ask about Jesus' coming, "When was He born?" is not very high on the list. It does not have much eternal significance. The questions that make all the difference are "Who?"; "What?"; and "Why?" Anyone who misses or ignores the answers to these three questions will miss God's eternal purpose. Let us contemplate God's plan for this earth, His purpose in creating the human race, His reason for allotting this time to us, and the preparation that is necessary for us to spend eternity with Him.

Eddie Cloer



"By common confession, great is the mystery of godliness:

*He who was revealed in the flesh,
Was vindicated in the Spirit,
Seen by angels,
Proclaimed among the nations,
Believed on in the world,
Taken up in glory" (1 Timothy 3:16).*

³James M. Gray, "O Listen to the Wondrous Story," *Songs of Faith and Praise*, comp. and ed. Alton H. Howard (West Monroe, La.: Howard Publishing Co., 1994).