



Eternal JOY

A CHRISTMAS EXCERPT FROM MORE THAN A STORY

BY SALLY MICHAEL • ILLUSTRATED BY FRED APPS

Truth:78

A NOTE TO READERS

Amidst the turmoil in this world, we sometimes find ourselves longing for good news—good news on the economic front, good news in the political world, good news in the educational realm, good news in our personal lives. These looming issues can tend to overshadow that which is the most important, the most essential, the most eternal good news—the “good news of great joy” for all people (Luke 2:10). In our longing for things to change in this temporal world, let us not lose sight that the greatest news has already been announced.

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.” (John 1:14)

The angel Gabriel brought this good news first to Zechariah in the temple, and then to Mary in Nazareth. Months later, shepherds watching their sheep near Bethlehem heard the good news announced in the night sky. This is the news that was prophesied by the prophets of old, coming to fulfillment centuries later.

More than 2,000 years have passed since this good news was revealed to Zechariah, Mary, and the shepherds. Nothing has overshadowed its importance. This is news that must be proclaimed year after year, generation after generation because it is the greatest news of all time. God sent His Son, born in the flesh, to die on the cross to purchase salvation for all peoples. This is “good news of great joy...For unto you is born...in the city of David, a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:10-11).

We now have the privilege and the responsibility to pass on this “good news of great joy” to our children and grandchildren in the hope that they will pass it on to their children, who will pass it on to their children and grandchildren “so that they should set their hope in God” (Psalm 78:7).

To help us with this, Truth78 has prepared this two-chapter excerpt from *More Than a Story: New Testament* so that the next generation can hear about the good news given to Zechariah, Mary, and the shepherds...so that they might rejoice in the good news of the birth of the Savior.

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. (Isaiah 9:6)

May your children and grandchildren rejoice this Christmas in the eternal joy offered to sinners by our Savior whose birth we celebrate.

Rejoicing in the birth of Jesus,

Sally Michael

C H A P T E R 9 1

GOD SPEAKS AND SENDS GOOD NEWS!

Gabriel Brings a Message to Zechariah and Mary—Luke 1:1-56

...“I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news.” (Luke 1:19)

After hundreds of years of sin and failure, constant rejection of God and rebellious disobedience, the disappointment of waiting year after year for the Messiah to make things right, and then hundreds of years of God seeming to be absent...suddenly, the silence was broken! Not by God speaking through a prophet, but through a special messenger—an angel. This angel had two important messages from God. *To whom did the angel talk, and what did he say?*



The angel came to a priest named Zechariah first. Zechariah lived when Herod was king of Judea (Judah). Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth, were godly older people who had no children—just like Abraham and Sarah.

One day, Zechariah was chosen to burn incense in the temple in Jerusalem. There was a crowd of people outside the temple praying. But Zechariah was alone at the altar of incense... until an angel appeared to him! *How do you think Zechariah reacted when he saw the angel?* Zechariah was surprised...and afraid!

But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord

their God, and he will 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 for the Lord a people prepared.” (Luke 1:13-17)

“In the spirit and power of Elijah”...These were familiar words. Could this be the messenger God promised through the prophet Malachi? How could Zechariah be sure that the message of the angel was true? How could he, an old man, and his wife, an old woman, have a baby? Who was this angel anyway? *And the angel answered him, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news.”*

But Zechariah doubted the angel’s words. So Gabriel told Zechariah that he would not be able to speak until the promise was fulfilled. Sure enough, when Zechariah finally left the temple, he couldn’t talk and had to “speak” by making signs. The people did not know exactly what had happened, but they realized that Zechariah had seen a vision in the temple.

Every word of God proves true. Not one of His promises fails. Just as God promised through the angel Gabriel, Elizabeth became pregnant. When Elizabeth was in her sixth month of pregnancy, Gabriel appeared again. But not to Zechariah. And not to Elizabeth.

He appeared to another woman, a young unmarried woman, a virgin named Mary. Mary was betrothed (promised in marriage) to a man named Joseph, who was of the royal line of David. *And he [Gabriel] came to her and said, “Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!”* Just like Zechariah, Mary was troubled. What did his greeting mean?

And the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” (Luke 1:30-33)



How could this be? Mary was not married to Joseph yet. She had never been with him or any man to have a baby. *And the angel answered her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and*

the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God.”

The Son of God—God’s very own Son? The One who would crush the serpent under His heel? The promised Messiah, the eternal King from the line of David! This was the baby Mary would carry! Could God’s glorious promises be coming true?

The angel had more surprising news for Mary. Her cousin, Elizabeth, was six months pregnant with a son. Elizabeth, who could have no children and now was old, was having a baby! How could this happen? This surely surprised Mary also, but **nothing is impossible with God. God is almighty; nothing is too hard for God.** He can give an old woman a baby with the spirit and power of Elijah to be God’s special messenger...and He can give a young woman a holy child born through the miraculous power of the Holy Spirit!

What was Mary’s response to the angel’s message, to God’s special but complicated plan for her life? And Mary said, “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” She would do what God had called her to do. She was God’s servant. She would willingly accept His plan for her and submit to God’s will.



Who would understand these strange yet wonderful happenings? Mary decided to visit her cousin Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary’s voice, the baby inside her leaped with great joy! *Why do you think this happened?* God’s promise of a Messiah was being fulfilled! Elizabeth’s baby rejoiced—he leaped for joy—in the presence of the unborn Savior. Mary saw with her own eyes the miracle of God—her cousin was having a baby in her old age. And that baby recognized that Mary’s baby was God’s own Son! How this must have encouraged Mary’s faith in God’s promise!

Elizabeth’s baby was full of joy about Mary’s special baby. *But how do you think Joseph felt when he heard that Mary was going to have a child?* He knew he was not the father. What should he do? He knew the punishment Mary could receive according to the Mosaic Law. If he made it known that Mary was pregnant and he was not the father, Mary could have been stoned to death. Joseph, *being a just man and*

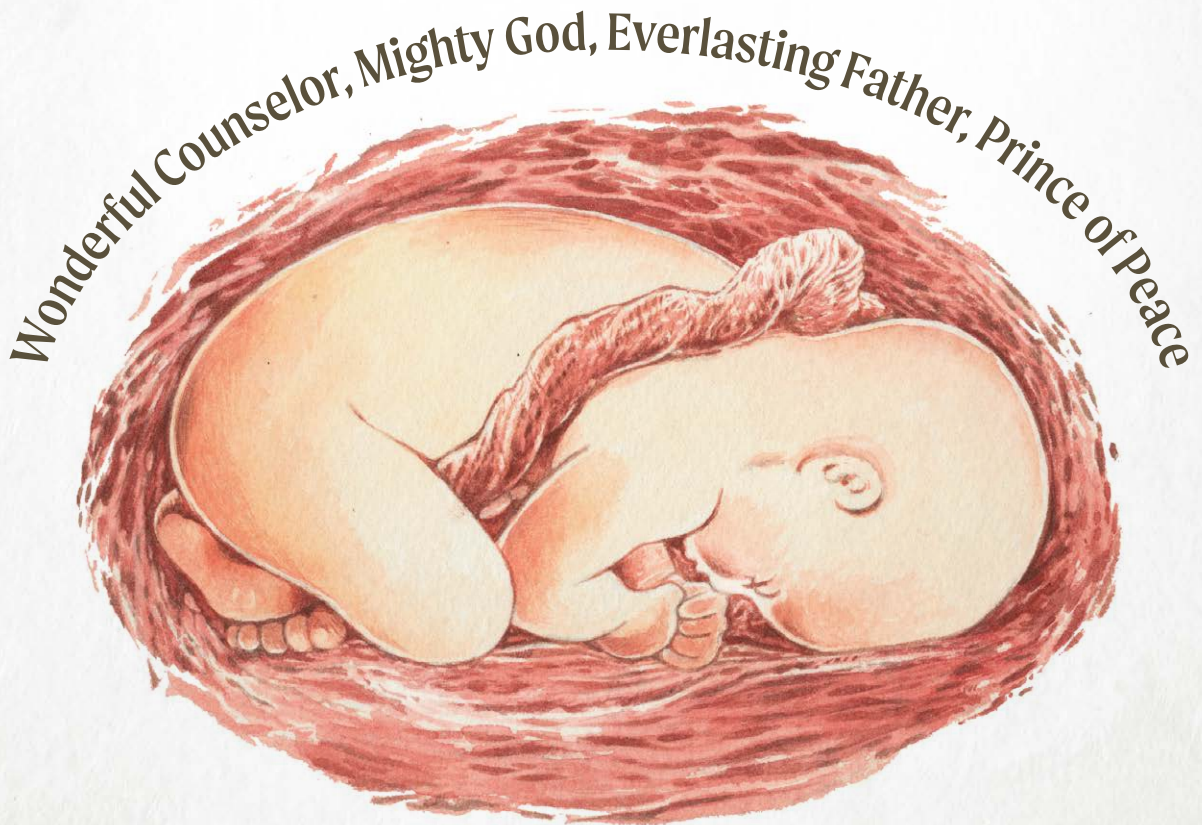
unwilling to put her to shame, resolved [firmly decided] to divorce her quietly. He would just quietly get out of the marriage agreement in front of two or three witnesses without raising a charge against her.

However, before Joseph did this, while he was still thinking about it, an angel came to him in a dream saying, *“Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”*

Mary’s baby was formed by the Holy Spirit. The baby was the Son of God, the Savior. More than seven hundred years before this, the prophet Isaiah had foretold the birth of Jesus, and now Joseph and Mary were seeing the fulfillment of that glorious promise!

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel. (Isaiah 7:14)

Immanuel means, “God with us.” The baby was God Himself coming as a man. This was the promised sign in Isaiah’s prophecy that a child would be born, a Son would be given, *and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6).* God was coming, not to live in the tabernacle, not to live in the Most Holy Place, but to live among men! God was coming in the flesh as a man to be among His people! He was coming to save them at last!



When Joseph woke from his dream, He accepted God's plan for his life, just as Mary did. He took Mary, who was carrying the Son of God, as his wife. They would be the earthly parents of the Messiah.

The eternal Son of God left heaven—a place of perfect love, peace, and goodness to be born as a baby into this sinful and broken world. Does the news of God sending His Son cause your heart to leap for joy? Are you amazed at a God who keeps His promises? Do you rejoice that God sent a Savior to come and live among us as fully God and fully man—the Son of God and the son of Mary?

The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. (John 1:9)

...though he [Christ Jesus] was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. (Philippians 2:6-7)

THAT YOU MAY BELIEVE

What does this chapter tell us about God?

Talk about and apply the **biblical truths** in **bold** text. Make them personal and apply them to what is happening in your family, church, community, or the world today.

Read Luke 1:46-55. What does this tell you about who God is?

Talk About: *...though he [Christ Jesus] was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. (Philippians 2:6-7)*

Read Luke 1:1-4. Why did Luke write this story of God's miraculous work?

Pray: Thank God for keeping His promise to send a Savior. Praise Him that nothing is impossible for Him. Ask God to give you a heart to be His servant and to accept His plan for your life joyfully.

Think About: *Why is it so amazing that God sent His Son to come and live on earth?*

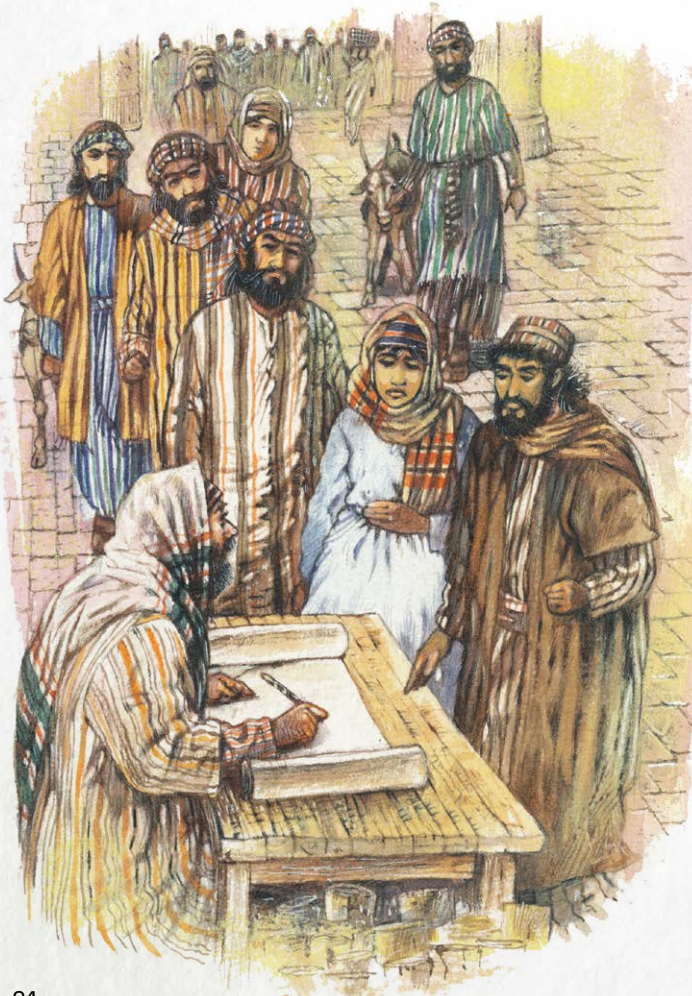
CHAPTER 93

GOOD NEWS OF GREAT JOY!

The Birth of Jesus the Savior—Luke 2:1-35

...“Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” (Luke 2:10b-11)

The Old Testament prophets gave more than 300 hints, signs, or prophecies about Jesus. They spoke hundreds of years before the birth of Jesus. How could one person fulfill all these prophecies? No one could ever fulfill all the prophecies by mere chance. It would be utterly and completely impossible...apart from the all-powerful hand of the sovereign God.³



Joseph and Mary lived in Nazareth, ninety miles from Bethlehem, where the prophet Micah said the Savior would be born. Did the prophet make a mistake? Did God forget this detail? **God never forgets His word. He is omniscient—all-knowing.** God’s plan was to show His greatness and worth. He loves to show His glory through “impossible situations,” like Elizabeth having a baby in her old age, and having His Son born in Bethlehem, and fulfilling more than 300 other prophecies. *How would God get Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem so the prophecy would be fulfilled?*

About the time that John was born, the ruler of the Roman Empire, Caesar Augustus, made a law that all the peoples should be “registered.” They needed to have their names recorded so the Romans could collect taxes from them. This had to happen in each person’s hometown. Since Joseph was from the line of King David, Joseph had to go to Bethlehem, the birthplace of his ancestor

David. So Joseph and a very pregnant Mary left the town of Nazareth in the region of Galilee (northern Israel) to go to Bethlehem.

Why did the registration happen at this time? Was it just Caesar's idea? And why did Caesar decide that all the people had to go to their hometown? God gave Caesar this idea. It was all part of God's plan to fulfill the prophecy given through Micah:

But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days. (Micah 5:2)

Bethlehem was crowded because of the registration, and there was no room for Joseph and Mary. So Mary gave birth to baby Jesus, "the Son of the Most High," not in a palace, but in a place where animals were kept. Mary's baby was wrapped not in fine clothing but in "swaddling cloths," and the eternal King from the royal line of David was laid in a manger—a feeding trough for animals! What a humble and lowly way for the Messiah, the King of kings, to enter the world.

Mary and Joseph named the baby Jesus, the name given to them by God through the angel Gabriel. *Do you know what Jesus means?* Jesus is the Greek form of the Hebrew name Joshua, which means, "Yahweh is salvation." *Why is this a good name for God's Son?* Just as Joshua had led God's people into the Promised Land years ago, this "Joshua" would lead God's people into the land of eternal salvation.

God's plans never fail. Every word of God proves true. God always does what He says He will do. The long-promised Savior had come! He was born in Bethlehem, just as God had said He would be. Did anyone notice His birth? In a field near Bethlehem, there were some shepherds watching over their sheep during the night. To them, it was probably just an ordinary night, watching their sheep to make sure they were safe from wild animals and didn't wander away. But it became a very extraordinary night! For an angel of the Lord appeared in the dark night sky, "and the glory of the Lord shone around" the shepherds. What a magnificent display of light, glory, and greatness! It filled the shepherds with great fear.

And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!" (Luke 2:10-14)

Was this true? Had the promised Savior finally come? After waiting for hundreds of years, was this the Messiah? The shepherds believed the amazing message of the angel. They were excited and decided to go to Bethlehem to see what "the Lord [had] made known to them." So they hurried away and found Mary, Joseph, and "the baby lying in a manger." It was just as the angel had told them! The shepherds spread the word about what they had heard and

seen. Those who heard their words were amazed. *And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.*

Why would the angels appear to shepherds? Why didn't they appear to the religious leaders or to the rulers of Judea? In the time of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob it was good to be a shepherd—shepherds were valued and respected. After many years, the people of Israel began to consider shepherding a lowly job. Although David had been a shepherd, shepherds were looked down on at the time of Jesus' birth—they were treated as some of the least important people in Judea.⁴ *So why would the angels appear to this unimportant, despised class of people?* Jesus didn't come with good news just for the rich and powerful. God's Son and His salvation is for all kinds of people, from the very highest to the very lowest.

Forty days after Jesus was born, Joseph and Mary brought Jesus to Jerusalem to present or dedicate Him to the Lord—just as Moses instructed in the Old Testament Law. They offered a sacrifice of two turtledoves (pigeons)—an offering allowed in the Old Testament for those who could not afford a lamb. *What does this tell you about Joseph and Mary?* Mary and Joseph were not rich or important people either. They were ordinary in many ways...but they were chosen by God to be the earthly parents for His Son.



Israel had waited so long for God to send the Messiah. For hundreds of years, they heard the prophets tell of God's promise to send a savior. People lived and died without seeing the coming of the Messiah. In Jerusalem, there was a godly man named Simeon who had waited all his life, trusting in God's promise. The Holy Spirit had revealed to Simeon that he would see the deliverance of God's people before he died. What a wonderful promise to Simeon! But how would Simeon recognize the Messiah? Would he be dressed as a king...or a priest? Simeon went to the temple the day Mary and Joseph brought Jesus there to dedicate him. There were all kinds of people in the temple. But when Simeon saw Jesus, he knew this was the One for whom he had long awaited. This tiny baby was the great, glorious, mighty Savior! Simeon took Jesus in his arms and praised God saying:



“Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.” (Luke 2:29-32)

Joseph and Mary were in awe of what this man said. God was making a way of salvation from sin! This was salvation not only for the Jewish people, but for all who would believe—for ordinary shepherds, for a godly old man, for men like Joseph and women like Mary, for young and old, for Jews and Gentiles (non-Jews), for people long ago, and for people today.

God has made a way for you, too. *Will you believe that Jesus is God's Son, the Promised Savior? Will you receive Jesus with joy as Simeon did?*

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. (Isaiah 9:6)

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:14)

THAT YOU MAY BELIEVE

What does this chapter tell us about God?

Talk about and apply the **biblical truths** in **bold** text. Make them personal and apply them to what is happening in your family, church, community, or the world today.

Think about all that had to happen for Jesus to be born in Bethlehem. What does this tell you about God's sovereign plans and His power?

Talk About: *And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:14)*

Why would God have His Son come as a baby? Why couldn't he just have come as a grown man? What does it mean that Jesus was "fully God" and "fully man"?

Pray: Thank God for sending Jesus the Savior for sinners. Confess your sinful heart desires and ask God for His forgiveness.

Think About: *Why did the angel bring his message to lowly shepherds? Why didn't he announce Jesus' birth to the king and rulers, or the religious leaders?*

3 Note of Interest: According to a professor of mathematics and astronomy, Peter W. Stoner, the chances of just eight prophecies coming true by sheer chance is 1 in 10^{17} (100,000,000,000,000,000). That would be equivalent to covering the whole state of Texas with silver dollars two feet deep *and then expecting a blindfolded man to walk across the state and on the very first try find the ONE coin you marked*.. The chance that only forty-eight prophecies would be fulfilled is 1 in 10^{97} (static1.squarespace.com/static/54fda90ae4b0c72416a43fb8/t/598df751d2b8571265362ab5/1502476116977/Mathematical+Proof+for+the+Existence+of+Jesus+by+Prophecies+Fulfilled.pdf). We know that God providentially guided every one of these prophecies to fulfillment, which is naturalistically impossible.

4 Randy Alcorn, "Shepherd's Status," Eternal Perspectives Ministries. In the time of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, it was noble to be a shepherd. But then Joseph moved his family to Egypt. The Egyptians didn't eat sheep. They thought sheep were worthless for food and sacrifices, and they despised anyone who was a shepherd. They also hated their Arab neighbors, who were shepherds. The Israelites spent 400 years in Egypt, and eventually the people of Israel also began to consider shepherding a lowly job. At the time of the birth of Jesus, shepherds were looked down on. They were treated as some of the least important people in Judea. *Why would God send angels to lowly shepherds?* (epm.org/resources/2008/Mar/11/shepherds-status/)



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