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The Miracles of Christmas - Part 1

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Every December, people around the world celebrate the holiday season called Christmas. Even in countries that are not culturally and historically Christian, Christmas is still an important day on the calendar. Unfortunately, in those lands that at one time were religiously and morally Christian, including the USA, Christmas has grown less and less significant in its spiritual dimension. Rarely does the popular media ever mention anything about the birth of Christ in its music or television presentations. Instead we get a constant diet of musical shows featuring popular recording artists doing the same old happy holiday songs, which sparingly give any glory to Jesus.

This trend only reflects the secular nature of modern society that is conditioned to ignore ancient supernatural events and focus on life in the present tense. One aspect of that is the tendency of many people to reject the idea of miracles. As the naturalistic worldview has gradually taken precedence, its adherents deny that the miraculous occurrences recorded in Scripture can possibly be regarded as historically true.

Another reason people reject the miracles in the Bible is that they don't see them happening today. They want to know why miracles are not as common in modern times as they were in biblical times. This question may arise because often people have a misconception that miracles happened all the time in ancient Bible days. That is actually not the case. Of course, the Bible records many such supernatural events, but often they were separated by hundreds of years. Usually miracles happened in clusters – at times when God was making important revelations or at major turning points in divine history.

One such turning point in history, in fact one of the most important of all time, was the birth of Jesus Christ into the world. Powerful miracles were associated with events leading up to, during, and following the birth of Jesus as told in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. In this two part

series we will examine six such miracles that those two books include in their narratives of the nativity of Christ. We contend that both Matthew and Luke were extraordinary gatherers of historical evidence for the stories they wrote in the Gospels. Thus, the veracity of these supernatural occurrences has solid eyewitness testimony from those who were there and relayed the stories to the Gospel writers Luke and Matthew. Luke made that quite clear in his opening paragraph as he wrote to his friend Theophilus ("Friend of God").

Many have undertaken to compile a narrative about the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as the original eyewitnesses and servants of the word handed them down to us. So it also seemed good to me, since I have carefully investigated everything from the very first, to write to you in an orderly sequence, most honorable Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things about which you have been instructed. Luke 1:1-4 NASB

MIRACLE 1: The Conception and Birth of John the Baptist

Most people are familiar with the story of Jesus' birth to the Virgin Mary in Bethlehem as told in Luke chapter two. We will certainly get to that point in this series. But what many people, even many Christians, are unfamiliar with is the story of the conception and birth of John the Baptist. Most are aware that he was the one who baptized Jesus in the Jordan River, but many don't know the miraculous circumstances of the beginning of his life.

This story is found in Luke 1:5-25 and 57-80. Several miraculous occurrences accompanied John's conception and birth. To begin with, his parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth, though they had prayed for years, had no children and were advanced in age. Zechariah was a priest who happened to be performing rare service burning incense

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in the Jerusalem temple when the angel Gabriel appeared to him. This supernatural appearance of a heavenly being was so unusual that it terrified Zechariah. Gabriel, however, told him not to be frightened, and informed him that another miracle was about to happen. Elizabeth, despite her age, was about to be pregnant and would bear them a son to be named John. The angel indicated that John would be a great preacher like Elijah to prepare people for the coming of the Lord. Zechariah didn't believe it was possible. His doubt caused Gabriel to make him mute until the child's birth. (Vs 59-66)

Later, Luke tells of John's birth and how everyone wanted Elizabeth to name him after his father. But she did as the angel commanded and called him John. Immediately Zechariah was able to speak again and proclaimed a prophecy concerning the ministry of his son. (vs. 67-79) Luke summarized John's young life in verse 80: *The child grew up and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel.*

This may not seem like an important miracle in the big picture of God's history. In fact, some skeptics might say Elizabeth's pregnancy was not a miracle at all, and that the angel story was just made up. She and Zechariah just got real lucky. But not from their point of view! They knew better. We need to keep in mind that it had been centuries since the Israelites had heard from the Lord. So the early events recorded in the Gospels had enormous significance for what was about to happen for the salvation of the world. Too often these miraculous events surrounding John's birth are passed over during the Christmas season.

MIRACLE 2: The Announcement To Mary

During the period of Elizabeth's pregnancy, another great miracle occurred that had earth shaking significance. Luke (1:26-38) says that in the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, something amazing happened to her younger cousin named Mary who lived in Nazareth of Galilee. Luke makes quite

clear two things about Mary. One is that she was a virgin, meaning she had never had sexual relations with a man (more about this later). The other point was that she was betrothed, or engaged, to be married to a man named Joseph. Luke also pointed out that Joseph was a descendant of David, a fact that had great importance for the identity of the Messiah.

Luke describes how the same angel, Gabriel, who had miraculously appeared to Zechariah, suddenly came to see Mary. She was also naturally frightened, but his introductory words to her were overwhelming: *"Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."* (Luke 1:28 NASB).

Luke says that Mary was confused by what the angel said. Gabriel then gave her major information: *"Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and give birth to a son, and you shall name Him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever; and His kingdom will have no end."* (Luke 1:30-33 NASB)

The appearance and communication of Gabriel to Mary is a miracle, just as it was to Zechariah. Of course there is more miraculous content to what the angel reveals that we will address in the next section.

But before we do, we need to look carefully at the words of Gabriel in verse 28. The word translated "favored one" in the NASB and most other English translations is *kecharitomene*, meaning one who has been favored with grace. Roman Catholics have interpreted that to mean not just that Mary has received grace, but that she is a repository of grace. This is reflected in the traditional Roman Catholic Douay-Rheims Bible translation of this verse: *"And the angel being come in, said unto her: Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women."* So Catholics believe that by reciting the rosary, "Hail, Mary, full of grace..." they are

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drawing on the grace that Mary can provide for them. Of course, the only source of grace is Jesus Christ who provides it by His death and resurrection. Mary is an important and honored figure in the New Testament, but she was as in need of God's grace for her salvation as anyone else.

MIRACLE 3: The Virgin Conception of Jesus

Now we come to the Christmas miracle that seems to cause the greatest difficulty for many people: the virgin birth of Jesus. Before we go further, we need to clarify one misconception (excuse the pun) about this doctrine. It was not Jesus' birth that was miraculous. That took place in the normal biological way. It was the fact that He did not have a human male father that conceived Him in Mary's womb – that was the miracle. This made it a totally different degree of miracle than that of the conception of John.

Throughout history this doctrine has been hard for people to believe. But it is interesting to note who the first person to question it was: none other than Mary herself. When Gabriel told her she was going to have a baby her first reaction was "*How will this be, since I am a virgin?*" (Luke 1:34 NASB). Even young Mary knew enough biology to understand that certain things had to happen in order to become pregnant, and they had not happened to her.

Gabriel went on to explain that "*The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; for that reason also the holy Child will be called*

the Son of God." (Luke 1:35 NASB) After reminding her of her cousin Elizabeth's miraculous conception, he then made what is the basis for all miracles in the Bible: "*For nothing will be impossible with God.*" (Luke 1: 37 NASB) Mary then graciously agreed to do God's will for her life.

Matthew also tells us that when Mary became pregnant, her betrothed husband Joseph was naturally upset. He decided to quietly divorce her. However, an angel of the Lord put his mind at ease in a dream and revealed to him also the miraculous nature of the conception. "*Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a Son; and you shall name Him Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.*" (Matthew 1:20-21 NASB)

Why do people have such trouble with the doctrine of the virgin conception of Jesus? Simply because they cannot accept the notion that miracles are possi-

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ble at all in a closed naturalistic universe. The answer to that objection, however, is that if God can create the universe from absolutely nothing, and can create life from non-life, then this doctrine of the Christian faith is not only possible but essential. It, and the other great miracle of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, together establish the foundation for the truth of the Christian gospel.

In Part 2 we will look at three more events of Christmas the have miraculous content all around them.