



AN UNEXPECTED SAVIOR

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A Service of Nine Lessons & Carols

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At the conclusion of this Service of Lessons and Carols, we will complete what the narrator described in the introduction as the grand “tale of the loving purposes of God.” That’s the thread that connects all nine lessons in this service.. Each of them is a key scene in the story of the Bible, which isn’t primarily a book of rules or a self-help guide. Rather it’s primarily the tale of Jesus, *the unexpected savior, who comes to rescue the world in a most unexpected way.*

Jesus’ story is very surprising. Yet it makes perfect sense if you understand his true identity and purpose as the Son of God. For this reason, Christians read these same lessons each year at this time. It’s like rereading a mystery novel once you know the ending, and seeing the clues you missed the first time through. Centuries before the first mystery novel, Christians were gathering at this time each year with joy and wonder to hear again the surprising story of Jesus, and marvel at God’s amazing rescue of the world through him.

In this brief message, let’s review some of the most surprising elements in Jesus’ story. As we do, we’ll note the clues that help us understand God’s purposes at Christmas.

JESUS’ SURPRISING BIRTH

If Jesus were the long-awaited Messiah and Son of God, why did he have such humble beginnings? One would expect that he would be born in a palace to royalty with all the kingdom celebrating the news. Think of the excitement last summer when handsome Prince William and beautiful Princess Kate emerged from St. Mary’s Hospital Paddington holding Prince George, the new heir.

The circumstances of Jesus’ birth were particularly *un-dignified* and *un-royal*. Jesus wasn’t born *at* St. Mary’s, but rather born *to* St. Mary, who was not a princess or a beauty queen but an ordinary teenager facing an unplanned pregnancy (at least from her perspective). Like all of us, Mary had a noble ancestry, if you trace it back far enough. But as we meet her, she’s nothing special. Her fiancé, Joseph, was the same. Originally from Bethlehem, Joseph was a humble craftsman working up in Nazareth, and that’s where he met Mary.

If Joseph or Mary had been of any importance whatsoever, Caesar wouldn't have herded them like cattle back to Joseph's hometown with Mary so late in her pregnancy. But off they went, some 100 miles over rough terrain, representing more than a week of walking, at the last climbing over 4000 feet up to Bethlehem.

When they arrived there was no place left to stay. Then presumably Mary's water broke, and the contractions started. Probably out of respect for Jesus and his family, the Bible skips over the sordid details of where Mary delivered and how public it was. All we are told is that Mary swaddled Jesus and lay him in a humble manger. No ornate cradle. No blankets embroidered with the family crest. No monogrammed footed pajamas. No crowd cheering outside the palace. Only a visit from the local shepherds' union.

This is a most unexpected birth story for the King of Kings, yet it's filled with clues shouting out why it had to be this way. For centuries many prophets foretold that the Messiah would be a new King David. Like the original, Jesus had to be born in the city of David, and his parents had to be descendants of David. Bethlehem was occupied territory, of course, so we shouldn't be surprised that Jesus wasn't welcomed by the Roman authorities. But there was no restraining the shepherds of Bethlehem. They had been waiting for a new shepherd king for a thousand years. All these clues point us back to David the Shepherd King.

The clues also point us *beyond* David, all the way back to Creation where we are reminded of God's purposes for mankind. In the beginning men and women were given a high calling: as God shepherded them, they were to shepherd his creation. But then one of the animals, a serpent, tempted their pride with his offer to become like God. So God's good world was turned upside-down. Instead of obeying God and shepherding the animals, humans followed a new shepherd, the least of all the animals. Instead of becoming like God, they fell into sin and behaved like brutes. Yet God had mercy on them and covered them with animal skins, signifying not only their loss of human dignity, but also foreshadowing what it would cost to save them.

Adam and Eve failed as God's under-shepherds. But Jesus came to set things aright. The prophet Isaiah promised a descendant of David who would return mankind's allegiance to God, and usher in God's peaceable kingdom, when:

The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat,
and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together; and a little child shall lead them. (Isa
11)

That's why the shepherds found Jesus in a manger. Where better to begin his rule than in the sheep pen with all the animals? What Adam and Eve failed to do, this little child would do as God's faithful shepherd king.

JESUS' SURPRISING REIGN

Why didn't Jesus behave like a king? Most people, including his disciples, expected him to assemble an army and lead a rebellion against the Roman occupation. Instead, he spent his time

teaching and healing and casting out demons, consistently helping restore individuals to human dignity. Huge crowds followed him, and the Bible says that “he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.”

In fact, in his teaching Jesus identified himself as “the Good Shepherd,” as a way of distinguishing his own reign from that of all the other leaders, those who, as Jesus put it, “flee when the wolves come, because they don’t care about the sheep.” But, Jesus said, “I am the good Shepherd.” Why? Because “I lay down my life for the sheep.”

To us, it sounds like a wonderful campaign promise. Imagine a presidential candidate saying, “I’ll lay down my life for you.” But many of his first hearers didn’t like it, because they knew Jesus was offering more than dedicated leadership. He was cluing them in on how he would rescue the world, by becoming a sacrificial lamb for their sins. That’s something self-righteous people don’t want to hear. Pride keeps people from acknowledging their need for a savior.

Ever since God covered Adam and Eve with animal skins, there was the idea of a sacrificial lamb. Jews understood that every sin was an act of treason against God, punishable by death. But they would sacrifice a lamb instead, transferring their own guilt onto the animal, in exchange for God’s pardon. It was a brutal reminder of what humanity had become because of sin and also the costliness of redemption.

One of the most vivid examples of this theme is the story of Abraham and Isaac. As Abraham lifted his hand against his only son, God stopped him and instead gave him a ram. So, the ram became Isaac’s substitute and died instead of him. Many centuries later, on very likely the same mountain outside of Jerusalem, God did not spare his only son. Rather, Jesus died on the cross as the ultimate sacrificial lamb.

Remember that in the beginning, mankind disobeyed God and became like the animals. At the cross, God died like an animal in order to reverse the curse, so that we might become human again. The Good Shepherd lay down his life for the sheep.

Few people could have seen it coming. In fact, as Jesus began to tell his disciples openly and clearly about what would happen at the cross they opposed him. It didn’t matter that Jesus also repeatedly promised his resurrection after 3 days. They just wouldn’t stand for a crucified king. But this side of Good Friday, we can see even more clearly why Jesus was born in the sheep pen. He came to die for our sins as the ultimate sacrificial lamb.

JESUS’ SURPRISING FOLLOWERS

During his ministry, self-righteous people criticized Jesus for eating and drinking with outcasts and undesirables. Jesus responded by saying, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.” It was a strong rebuke to those who thought they were already on good terms with God and didn’t need a Savior.

Sadly, the stories of Jesus are filled with examples of those who were too proud to admit that they needed saving. They felt they were getting by well enough on their own without him, so they rejected him, the sacrificial lamb whom God sent to them and for them. Meanwhile, the people who welcomed and received Jesus were people who knew they needed God's healing and intervention to restore their dignity. That's why outcasts and undesirables followed him. They came to Jesus to become human again.

But what about the Wise Men? They weren't outcasts—they were rich with gold, frankincense & myrrh. We know little about them save that they were magi, ancient philosophers from the east where the Jews had lived in exile. During that time, we can presume that the school of the magi became familiar with the ancient prophecies of the Jewish messiah. From then on they began to watch the stars and wait for him.

What's so surprising about the Wise Men is their humility. We don't have many examples today of people who are both brilliant intellectuals and also genuinely humble. In the Bible, however, wisdom and humility consistently go together, because wisdom is ultimately expressed in terms of reverence for and allegiance to God. Wise men and women, from God's perspective, are those who swallow their pride and admit their need for a savior.

As modern people we tend to bristle at such things because we've embraced the great myth of progress. We believe that given enough time and money and education, we can solve any and all of our problems. Yet progress hasn't served us very well, has it? From a global perspective, think of all the problem areas around the world, and the ongoing efforts to fix them, and how very little progress has been made, despite billions of dollars spent with good intentions. In our country, here on Capitol Hill, we're celebrating compromises that keep the lights on instead of significant victories. From a personal perspective, we are all suffering under the weight of sin, whether as victims, or from our own sin, i.e. those things we have done or left undone. Finally there's death, that ever-present countdown to the unnatural catastrophe of sin awaiting us all. It will take more than self-help books and good therapy and better schools and successful legislation and all the humanitarian aid we can muster to make the world a better place. My own sin is far too weighty a problem, let alone the brokenness of the entire world.

Jesus rose from the dead on Easter, and now he lives and reigns as the Prince of Peace. He invites all people, both Jews and Gentiles, men and women of every race, tribe and tongue, to join him in his kingdom. Put your faith in him, and he will make you human again, restoring your dignity, reconciling you to God, and giving you freedom from sin.

Thinking back to the illustration of the mystery novel, what makes the story of the Wise Men so remarkable is that they caught all the clues about Jesus the first time through the story, without skipping ahead to the end. Somehow they perceived Jesus' true identity and purpose at the time of his birth. So they packed up their treasures and came to worship him. It's the most natural response once you glimpse the loving purposes of God in Christmas.

Follow the Wise Men to Jesus, and lay your life and your treasures before him this Christmas. In the presence of such royalty, we can set aside our pride and stop pretending in our own ability. Wise men and women worship him as the Good Shepherd who lay down his life for the sheep.