

The Paradox

An Indescribable Gift, Part 3

Matthew 1 & Luke 2

A couple of weeks ago after one of the morning services, I was given a daily tear off calendar with the cover title reading, “What Cats Can Teach Us.” I think it was in the 3rd service that I read one of the pithy statements for the day and then made fun of it . . . well, as a Christmas gift to all of you who love cats – I thought I’d show you this video clip – sent to me from another church member this past week – it’s proof that cats are indeed incredibly intelligent . . . as you watch this cat, keep your eye on the computer screen.

Merry Christmas!

Thus far in our Christmas series of studies we have noted the prophecy of the coming Messiah – the One would be called Wonderful, Counselor, the Mighty God, The Originator of Eternity – or as your English Bible reads – the everlasting Father – the Prince of Peace.

In our last session, we unpacked the pedigree of the coming Messiah and noted the glory of the grace of God who included redeemed sinners into the lineage of Jesus – which is something God is continuing to do as He places all those who believe in Christ into the very family tree of God – for as many as received Him – Jesus Christ – to them He gave the right to become children of God (John 1:12)

We have noted the prophecy . . . the pedigree . . . and now today, the paradox.

The word paradox simply refers to something that appears to create a contradiction; it can also refer to something which is contrary to popular or accepted opinion.

Christianity is surrounded with paradox . . . we are in the world, but not of it; we live to the

betterment of our culture, while knowing our culture will not last; we serve with confidence an unseen God; but our faith *is* the evidence of things not seen.

We enter into a season marked by crass materialism, yet consider none of it worth anything apart from the gift of God through a poverty stricken girl who delivered the Savior in a makeshift barn.

What a narrative of apparent contradictions.

Is even celebrating Christmas a contradiction we should avoid? Does it contradict what we truly believe?

Isn’t the history of this season laced with unbelief and idolatry?

Certainly, the Romans decorated their temples and their pagan altars with greenery and candles. December 25th was the celebration of one of their chief gods.

Go back into the days of the Roman Empire and you’ll discover pagan priests using mistletoe in their pagan ceremonies; arranging holly and ivy for decor in their pagan temples.

By the 5th century, all of these trappings had become a part of the church’s celebration of Christmas.

The Puritans tried to stamp out any observance of Christmas. They passed a law in England in 1644 that made Christmas Day an official working day. In fact, for a while in England, it was literally illegal to cook special desserts like plum pudding and mince pie on December 25th – which only made people to bake all their pies on Christmas Eve.

Even Great Britain’s Parliament met for years on December 25th to show their disdain for Christmas Day celebrations.

Frankly, the Apostle Paul made it clear in *Romans 14 when he addressed this basic issue; he wrote, "One man regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Let each man be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes it for the Lord."*

In other words, no day is any more special than another. But if you choose to make one day, or one season special – here's the point – make the most of it for the glory of God.

Give it redemptive, gospel meaning.

Like Martin Luther the reformer who many believe was the first to come up with the idea of taking lighted globes and attaching them to his Christmas tree . . . signifying the birth of the Light of the World.

He took something pagan and gave it redemptive purpose.

The fact that we observe Christmas is not the issue. *How* we observe it and *why* we observe it is!

And by the way, if you decide not to observe something because it has worldly associations or even origins, you might want to avoid studying history . . .

In fact, in a few weeks, make sure you don't reference the New Year or even write the word January. You'll be writing the English equivalent to the Roman god Janus – from which we get our word January.

He's a god with two faces; one looks back at the year now spent and the other face looks ahead to the coming New Year.

Writing resolutions in January has pagan roots.

And while you're at it, don't drive a car made by Mazda – that company name came from one of the ancient Persians chief gods – his name was Mazda.

And you might even take the fish symbol off your bumper.

That symbol was in use long before the church adapted it to mark their secret places of worship. In fact, the reason it was so effective was because it was so common.

It happened to be the symbol associated with the mother goddess. Sideways, it looked like a fish; but vertically it represented the womb of the goddess.

In China, the goddess Kwan-yin – was often portrayed in the likeness of a fish.

In Egypt, Isis the mother goddess was called the Great Fish of the Abyss.

In Greece, the fish goddess, Aphrodite Salacia was worshipped by her followers – oh and by the

way, they worshipped her on Friday by eating fish in her honor.

So . . . if you want to avoid pagan roots entirely, don't eat fish on Friday.

In fact, don't even use the name Friday – it's a transliteration of another goddess named Freyeda.

How tied in can you be – you're in your Mazda, with a new fish symbol on your bumper; it's Friday, you're at Burger King getting a fish sandwich combo, heading home to set up your Christmas tree.

You're in really deep trouble.

Frankly, the Christmas story is filled with one paradox after another.

Think about it: first and foremost is the coming of God, in the form of a newborn baby.

What a paradox – the God-man!

The lyrics to a wonderful song sort of bundle it all up – it reads:

*Mary, did you know that your baby boy
Has come to make you new?
This child that you've delivered
Will soon deliver you*

*Mary, did you know that your baby boy
Has walked where angels trod?
When you kiss your little baby
You've kissed the face of God*

*The blind will see, the deaf will hear
And the dead will live again
The lame will leap, the dumb will speak
The praises of the Lamb*

*Mary, did you know that your baby boy
Is Lord of all creation?
Mary, did you know that your baby boy,
Will one day rule the nations?*

*Did you know that your baby boy
Is heaven's perfect Lamb?
This sleeping child you're holding
Is the 'Great I Am'!*¹

The truth is, Mary really didn't know fully . . . nor did Joseph . . . in fact, they obeyed God even though they staggered under the implications.

Imagine *this* paradox – a virgin has conceived! Those are self-contradicting terms.

Let's take a closer look at that particular paradox that just about ended the Christmas story before it could begin.

Turn to *Matthew's Gospel* account one more time – and notice the stunning, if not tragic, news – at least that's how it was to one individual.

Matthew 1:18. Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with Child from the Holy Spirit.

Now read that again, only slower.

When his mother Mary had been betrothed – you remember from our study last time that the betrothal – the kiddushin – was the second part of the three-part Jewish wedding tradition.

They had declared their vows – they were legally wed, even though the third stage – the celebration and consummation of their marriage wasn't for another year.

During a normal Jewish betrothal, the man was typically building onto his father's house while the bride to be was preparing her trousseau – clothing and linens and household items they would need in their new home.

By the way, you need to understand that a Jewish betrothal was a great deal more binding than our tradition of engagement. They were actually pledged in marriage. In fact, according to Jewish law, the only way their relationship could be broken was by a writ of divorce, in the presence of two witnesses.ⁱⁱ

Should the man die before their marriage and consummation, the woman would still be referred to as the virgin widow.ⁱⁱⁱ

They've been betrothed – pledged in marriage – and now they are preparing for marriage.

Notice what Matthew clarifies as he writes in ***verse 18, When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, notice, before they came together she was found to be with child . . .***

In other words, before Joseph and Mary consummated their marriage – she's pregnant.

In fact, you could literally understand this to read – **she was found out.**

This is devastating news. And people might just jump to the conclusion that Joseph and Mary just couldn't wait out the year of betrothal and they consummated their vows before the ceremony.

But what happens next proves they hadn't jumped the gun.

Instead of hurrying up the ceremony like David and Bathsheba did in the Old Testament to cover up her pregnancy; so that nobody could do the easy math, Joseph makes a decision to continue following the law . . . which is proof he wasn't the fella who got her pregnant.

Notice ***verse 19. And her husband – note that – her husband – Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly.***

It's easy to skip over the astonishment of Mary as the angel informs her that she has supernaturally conceived with the Messiah by the Holy Spirit who touched one of her eggs and brought it to life.

We can't even begin to understand that.

But it's easy to sort of skip over her amazement and even easier to forget all about Joseph's immediate agony.

What a confusing tragedy to his heart . . . and what a disgrace to his name.

First century Jewish law virtually left him with no option to recover his credibility unless he exposes her infidelity and divorces her.^{iv}

Keep in mind, as one New Testament scholar pointed out in a recent study, Jewish society allowed little privacy; Joseph had probably never gotten to know Mary very well anyway in this arranged marriage. He would have had little reason to believe her insistence of innocence.^v

I mean he's thinking, "Who *is* she . . . really?!"

And he would have been terrified to marry her now – given the fact that she had risked so much of her own future by willingly, evidently, obviously seeing another man.

Still, notice Joseph's kindness as he plans to keep her from public shame and resolved to ***divorce her quietly*** and then try to pick up his shattered life and broken heart and stunned mind and move on as best he can.

The last thing that Joseph, a righteous man would fear doing would be to keep Mary and then as she began to show allow people to assume that he was the father and that he had not kept the law and that he had disgraced his God and his betrothed.

Which is why the angel's message to Joseph in a dream that night begins with the words in ***verse 20, "Joseph, do not fear – don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife . . . it really was the Holy Spirit!"***

Joseph is being asked to take Mary through the betrothal period and then marry an obviously expectant woman in probably a private ceremony

instead of the usual public celebration that would have included the entire village – that won't happen now.

In fact, they will both live with the accusation of fornication for the rest their lives. When Jesus was in His 30's and involved in His ministry, the Jewish leaders accused him of *being born as a result of sexual immorality (John 8:41)*.

We know what you your mother did . . . you're no Messiah – you're the son of an ungodly woman.

For Joseph – and for Mary – don't ever forget what the paradox of the Christmas story meant for them – it created the appearance of a contradiction to who they really were.

And listen, beloved . . . as long as they live, they will never have their reputation back again in the opinion of their world.

I wonder how many listening to me are unwilling to follow Jesus Christ because of what will happen to your reputation – what people might think of you then.

Here's the message to Joseph and Mary and to you and me – don't be afraid of what will happen to your reputation – your business – your future . . . surrender it all to me.

Some of the most wonderful words found in the biography of this man appear in *verse 24*. ***When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name, Jesus.***

There are two more people – ungodly people – to whom the incarnation of God will present a contradiction of terms.

Luke's Gospel account informs us of what happened 9 months later . . . he opens chapter two with the familiar words, ***"In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered (Luke 2:1)***

Translate that – taxed.

The political leader wants everyone registered to make sure no one's skipping out on paying their taxes.

Some things never change, right?

What's fascinating is that Bethlehem, which means, House of Bread, is the home of David, the King.

This is where he kept his sheep and grew up to become King. Even earlier, these are some of the fields where Boaz met the widow who would become his wife.

And now, God providentially arranges what Joseph and Mary would have never volunteered to do – travel to Bethlehem during the very time she's expecting her baby.

They have no idea that *Micah* had prophesied centuries earlier that the Messiah would be born in ***Bethlehem (Micah 5:2)***.

So this idea from Caesar was really the prompting of God.

The Bread of Life must be born in House of Bread – the place of his royal ancestry.

I have a fascinating book in my library entitled *The Twelve Caesars* and I often pull it out and rummage through it to re-acclimate myself to the world that Jesus Christ was not only born into, but the early church as well.

I pulled that book out this past week and read again the chapter on Caesar Augustus.

By the way, the name Caesar was the same title as Czar or Kaiser or Pharaoh – it was a political title, which simply meant, ruler. However, the Caesar's believed, much like the Pharaoh's that they were divinely bred – they were linked to the gods.

Just a few years before the birth of Christ, this particular Caesar – Caesar Augustus – had coins minted with Julius Caesar, on one side given the title God and his own image stamped on the other side of the coin bearing the caption, "The Son of a God."

He did it to impress on the empire that he was of divine parentage.

Even more than that - as Caesar Augustus inherited the throne of his predecessor, a comet was seen in the sky for seven days. The empire believed it to be an omen that the soul of Julius Caesar was received among the immortal gods.

Caesar Augustus immediately had a star chiseled into a new statue of Julius Caesar.^{vi}

So here you effectively have a god incarnate, testified by a star in the heavens, and now his son has ascended the throne of the empire.

With that as a backdrop, imagine the explosive nature of Persian astrologers – Persian kingmakers – arriving in Jerusalem, saying they've come because of a star in the heavens leading them to the King of the Jews.

Matthew picks up that encounter back in ***chapter 2 and verse 1***. ***Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, 2. Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east and***

have come to worship Him.” 3. When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.

A king with a star appearing in the sky!

In other words, this newborn is bigger than Herod . . . he’s tantamount to Caesar.

Herod was troubled and all Israel with him.

Keep in mind that these wise men – or Magi – were from Persia – modern day Iran.

They were the faculty members who trained the royalty and high class citizenry.

They were also astrologers who had centuries before become disciples of their leading Wise man – a man named Daniel.

And now, centuries later, an entourage arrives in Jerusalem from Old Persia.

In the early centuries, church tradition taught that there were 12 wise men. In later years, the number was reduced to 3 – probably because most churches didn’t have enough room on stage for 12 wise men during their Christmas play.

This was an incredible entourage from old Babylon – these were the Babylonian king makers.

Herod . . . was troubled.

I’ll bet he was. He was Herod, the Great! He had been appointed by his father to rule Galilee; and his father had been personally appointed by Julius Caesar himself.

He was the King of that region . . . He was the King of the Jews.

By the time you’re introduced here to Herod in **Matthew chapter 2** he’s a seventy year old, paranoid, brutal killer. And he just so happens to be jealous of his power and his throne.

In fact, he will murder 3 of his sons so that they can’t have his throne.

Listen, he was the King of the Jews.

Now a bunch of Persians show up asking for the King of the Jews and declaring that this particular newly born king actually had a star sign from the heaven’s implying He was related to the gods.

He wasn’t just related. He was the anointed Messiah – God in the flesh.

And Herod was troubled!

That word means agitated, visibly shaken.

Someone dares to take my throne and even indirectly challenge Caesar with divine lineage.

In fact, notice that Herod was agitated, but so was all of Jerusalem.

He’s going to mess up our lives . . . He might change our systems . . . He might even interrupt our calendars.

The same three reactions to the news of Jesus Christ’s birth are the same reactions of our world to this day.

1. The first reaction is anger.

Ladies and Gentlemen, to this day your world and mine is filled with Herods and Caesars . . . nobody has the right to challenge their sovereignty – no one has the right to challenge their opinion – no one has the right to demand their allegiance.

They are not about to let anybody else be king of their lives.

Tell someone that Jesus Christ deserves to be their Lord and Ruler and Master and King and just watch as they become visibly shaken.

Which is why in this season, our world is somewhat comfortable with Jesus staying in the manger. Just don’t get out of that manger.

And if you do, hurry quickly to the cross and they stay there.

Don’t interrupt my life . . . don’t demand my surrender . . . and don’t call me a sinner while you’re at it.

Stay in that manger . . . or stay on that cross.

Don’t ascend back to the Father . . . don’t take a seat on the throne of the universe, surrounded by angelic hosts who constantly sing of your holiness . . . don’t threaten us with coming back to judge our sin.

Just stay in that manger.

We’ll mention your name a few times at the Christmas Eve party – and we might even sing some Christmas carols – but you’re definitely out of place at the New Year’s Eve party.”

We’re going to leave you in that manger.

2. The second reaction is Apathy.

Herod convenes the spiritual leaders of Israel and asks them where the wise men are going to find the Messiah – notice what they said, **verse 4. And assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ as to be born. They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea . . .”**

Would you notice they did not say, “We have no idea where this baby is supposed to be born . . . we

don't know what those Persian nutcases are talking about . . . they've been out in the sun a little too long."

How tragic that these men didn't care enough to take that five mile journey to see if indeed the Savior had been born.

They knew the prophecy of scriptures, but they missed the birth of the Savior.

And 33 years later many of them will stand before Pilate as Jesus Christ is about to be condemned, and voice their refusal of Christ as their king, shouting, "We have no king but Caesar."

Anger, apathy . . .

3. Thirdly, there were those who responded in adoration

These men had traveled hundreds of miles. It would have taken them months to travel that distance in the first century . . . add to that the fact that they would have prepared for weeks, if not months, to begin this journey.

You need to know that when they arrived in Bethlehem, they did not show up at a stable and stand next to shepherds and kneel in the straw before Christ's feed trough.

Notice Matthew 2:11 And they came into the house and saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him.

They came into a house. Evidently a home that Joseph either made himself or rented. We're told here that they **saw the child** – not a brephos, the Greek word for baby; but paidion – the Greek word for little child.

By the time the magi had arrived, Jesus is anywhere from 1 to 2 years of age.

And before this toddler who had just learned how to walk, they fell on their faces and worshipped.

Conclusion:

- A birth of Christ created scandal that would never die
- A birth of Christ created suffering that would never get easy – for Joseph and Mary and for all who to this day obey the commands of God, in spite of what it means to their lives, their fortunes, their reputations.
- The birth of Christ created sincerity in genuine worship that continues to this very day as we acknowledge Him as Lord and Savior and Sovereign over all that is.

Perhaps you're thinking, well, I'm like those wise men. I'm not like Herod or those Jewish leaders . . . I'm one of the magi . . . that's me.

Oh? What will you do with Jesus Christ on December 26th . . . on January 1st.

Will you surrender to His mastery and His right to rule over your heart and life . . . does that make you bristle with agitation?

Will you honestly admit, "You know, I'll probably not even think about Him much after Christmas . . . I don't know, He's just not a big deal."

Anger . . . apathy . . . or adoration.

From that day to this, Jesus Christ will not force you to surrender to Him . . . to suffer for Him . . . to worship Him . . . but He does invite you.

He invites you today . . . not just to come to His cradle . . . and to His cross . . . He also invites you to join Him in His kingdom.

He is the Son of David . . . He is the true and everlasting Caesar . . . He is the coming Prince of Peace.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 12/22/2013 by Stephen Davey.

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i Lyrics by Mark Lowry, Copyright Word Music, LLC

ii Grant R. Osborne, *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Matthew* (Zondervan, 2010), p. 75

iii William Barclay, The Gospel of Matthew, Volume 1 (Westminster Press, 1975), p. 23

iv Osborne, p. 76

v Ibid

vi Michael Grant, The Twelve Caesars (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1975), p. 54