

The Presentation of the Lamb

Beyond Bethlehem: The Boyhood of Jesus – Part I

Luke 2:21-35

Introduction

Thank you so much for all your cards, emails, meals, and prayers on my behalf and that of my family while I was recovering from a broken kneecap. We have so appreciated this wonderful family called Colonial. The past two months have provided so many illustrations of your love and care for us.

While recuperating I received a lot of things about or from cats. I thought you would enjoy hearing some of the cards and notes.

One card reads, “I’m sure lots of people are thinking of you and hoping you’re feeling better today; I just wanted to let you know that I’m one of them . . . signed, the Cat.”

Another card has a picture on the front of a bunch of kittens. It reads, “Please cheer up – don’t make me send you a basket of kittens.”

I want you to know this card worked – I cheered up, immediately!

This is my favorite picture on a card, even though it included a cat. Take a look at this – it was perfect!



By the way, many of you have offered to loan me your cats. One guy wanted me to know that cats could be trained in special ways to take care of the mice problem I have. He sent a picture of a highly trained cat:



I think cats are dangerous enough without teaching them how to shoot a gun!

Let me mention one more. Someone sent me a get well card with a turtle on the front.



This is the picture on the front of the card showing a turtle wrapped in an ace bandage. They wrote inside the card, “Since everybody has probably sent you dozens of cards with cat pictures on them, I thought I’d send you one with a turtle instead. Besides, this one was a buck cheaper.”

I love his honesty!

However, he was right. Over the past two months I have I received cat cards, cat puzzles, cat pictures, and drawings of cats by little kids in our

Sunday school program – who are obviously not being taught sound doctrine. Then, to top it all off, I received this gift of a stuffed cat. Is this real looking or what? I have had people walk into my office at home, see this in the corner, and say, “Whoa, you’ve got a cat.”

This is so real. I took it out to my dog Pixie and when I showed it to her, she froze. It completely messed her up. It is going to take weeks of counseling. Then the thought struck me, “I’m going to just set this in my garage – if she can’t tell the difference, the mice can’t either – they’ll just fall over dead.”

This is so lifelike that it might very well be a real, live – uh, dead, stuffed cat. Whatever it is, I want you to know that this is a cat I can love. So, from now on, I have a cat.

I am going to put away my cat now.

Let me read one more letter. “We’re originally from New Jersey and when we heard you broke your kneecap, we immediately knew what had transpired on that fateful Saturday afternoon in your garage. When you are raised in the Garden State, you learn early these truths: first, Giant’s stadium sits atop the premier graveyard for Mafia snitches; Godfather does not refer to one who mentors in the ways of God the Father, and the following equation always applies – mob loans + missed payments = broken kneecaps. Rest assured, we’ll stick to the party line about you falling.”

Turn to the Gospel delivered through Luke, chapter 2.

If you were to ask the average Christian today what happened to Joseph, Mary, and Jesus after the shepherds left the manger scene in Bethlehem, most would admit, “I’m not sure.”

This is because the normal Christmas play ends somewhere around verse 20 of Luke chapter 2, which reads,

The shepherds went back, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as had been told them.

For most Christians, this ends the significant scenes in the early days of Jesus, Joseph, and Mary.

Part of the challenge we face is that God the Father evidently did not want much recorded about God the Son’s life between His birth and His ministry operation, which commenced when He was thirty years old. He wisely knew that the incarnation would forever remain a mystery to us – God as a baby is one

thing; God as an eight year old or a sixteen year old is only more difficult to comprehend.

The Lord knew that mystery can often lead to mysticism, mythology, and misinterpretation, so for the most part, the record of scripture is silent.

As a result, the church tried to lend a hand in the third and fourth centuries with apocryphal books. These did more damage than good.

Apocryphal means “hidden,” and came to mean dubious or spurious writings by supposed church scholars. These writers did nothing more than catalogue legends and myths that bolstered the growing church traditions regarding non-biblical subjects such as praying to saints, the role of Mary in redemption, and the existence of purgatory, to name a few.

One particular apocryphal book called the Gospel of Thomas attempted to fill in the gaps about the boyhood of Jesus. It ends up defining a portrait of Jesus that would have made Him as sinful as any other child in need of redeeming.

In one event described, young Jesus was fashioning little sparrows out of mud on the Sabbath day. This would have been considered laboring or working on the Sabbath and was forbidden. Some other children ran to tell on Jesus. Just as Joseph arrived to punish Jesus for profaning the Sabbath, Jesus breathed on the dirt sparrows causing them to come to life and fly away. This left no evidence of His violation of the Sabbath. He was a pretty clever boy.

On another occasion recorded in the Gospel of Thomas, a boy from the village threw a rock at young Jesus and hit Him on the shoulder. Jesus turned around and cursed him, which caused the boy to immediately fall down dead.

In a similar episode, some neighborhood boys were mistreating Jesus as He was playing in the rain one day. Jesus was making little puddles of water that He miraculously made pure and drinkable. One boy came over and stomped all over His little puddles causing the water to drain away. Jesus told the boy that he would not live to see the next day and of course, the boy fell down dead.

If I were Jesus, I would have done these things. This is great stuff. I can remember some kids in my neighborhood as a child that I would have toasted if I had had the power.

There was a bully in my neighborhood just like Jesus had in His. It meant risking your life to ride a bike past his house. My ten-year-old friends and I

were outside with our bikes one day when we noticed him walking down the street away from us. I got up the courage and as much speed as I could and pedaled my little bike past him – never mind that I was yelling names at him as I rode by, but that was before I was called into the ministry. It was only after I called him those names that I realized I had ridden my bicycle into a cul-de-sac. I was not a very bright sinner. He caught me, knocked me off my bike, and proceeded to pay me back far more than I deserved. If I had had power – oh man, what I could have done!

We can easily imagine these scenes. The problem is that all we are doing, like the spurious Gospel of Thomas, is imposing on Jesus our own sinful flesh.

According to the Gospel of Thomas, on one occasion the little boy Jesus got so upset with His stepfather Joseph that He pinched Joseph's ears until they hurt. Jesus then said to him, "That is what you deserved."

One more spurious account by Thomas records a time when Jesus was eight years old and was helping Joseph cut wood for a bed frame. Joseph cut one of the boards too short, which was a costly mistake for the poor carpenter. However, eight-year-old Jesus told Joseph to pull on one end of the board while He pulled on the other and the board miraculously stretched out to the perfect length.ⁱ

The trouble with these apocryphal, uninspired writings – and there are many – is that they describe a different Jesus. He becomes a rude, unkind, vengeful, self-centered, rebellious boy who uses His powers to not only fix problems that made life difficult, but to get rid of kids in the neighborhood who made Him mad.

The record of scripture is vastly different. Jesus lived a life we cannot imagine – a life of restraint and without sin. He did not use His powers to better Himself or cut down His enemies.

This is the kind of life we cannot imagine.

- Jesus never sinned (Hebrews 9:14);
- Jesus would grow up to have perfectly fulfilled the law (Matthew 5:17);
- One reason Jesus did this was so He would qualify as the unblemished Lamb to be sacrificed for the sins of the whole world (I John 2:2).

So, let us make sure we go back to "sola scriptura," or to what the scriptures alone say. What has the Bible revealed about the boyhood of Jesus?

The truth is that the Bible is not as silent as the average Christmas play might lead us to believe. It was *not* over after the shepherds left the manger scene. It was just beginning. In fact, eight days after the manger scene, some wonderful events began to unfold in the life of our infant Messiah.

Let us explore three of these events, beginning with verse 21 of Luke chapter 2.

And when eight days had passed, before His circumcision, His name was then called Jesus, the name given by the angel before He was conceived in the womb.

In this passage, beginning with this verse, we see Jesus and His parents involved in one way or another in three ceremonies. These actually revealed a lot about Joseph and Mary's faith in God and surrender to His will.

Ceremonies in the Boyhood of Jesus

1. The first ceremony was what we will call the ceremony of identification.

In the day when Mary delivered Jesus, every Jewish baby boy would be circumcised after eight days; that is, if the baby's parents cared about God's commands. Circumcision brought the boy into the national life of the Hebrew people and identified him with Abraham's household.

This act was commanded in Genesis 17 and had Jesus not been circumcised, He would not have been identified with His people even though both His parents were descendants of Abraham. It was a statement of faith.

By fulfilling this command, Joseph and Mary would be following God's word relating to the Abrahamic covenant. As a result, Jesus Christ would be eligible to fulfill the promises that God had pledged to Abraham.ⁱⁱ

Circumcision was considered such a sacred duty for every faithful Jewish family that it could be carried out on the Sabbath day. A Jewish leader or doctor would perform the simple cutting away of the foreskin. It would be during this simple ceremony that the parent's would announce the name of the child.

As the pain-filled cry of Jesus, the son of God, pierced the air, He experienced His first moment of suffering at the hand of mankind. These tears were among His first upon taking on human flesh. His humiliation and suffering had already begun.

Joseph and Mary were also suffering, being dazed, ostracized, confused, and alone. These two teenagers, although Joseph may have been a little older, traveled to Bethlehem under a cloud of suspicion – all because of the will of God.

It had been a whirlwind. Their lives had only recently been upended. It had already taken an angel to convince Joseph to take Mary to be his wife after she was found to be pregnant during their betrothal.

This would be the scandal of Joseph's family and their entire village. There would be no wedding ceremony or wedding march. There would be no family festival in which the village would celebrate the "hoopa," or union, of Joseph and Mary.

The baby will only add an exclamation point to their guilt. Joseph and Mary will never live this down.

These rumors will never go away. In fact, when Jesus Christ makes His claim to be the Messiah, the Jewish leaders will dig up the dirty rumors again and throw them back into His face. They make the accusation, "We were not born of fornication, like you! We know how you got your start, so don't lecture us." (John 8:41)

Joseph and Mary would move from the stable into humble quarters somewhere in Bethlehem, and Joseph would take odd jobs to eke out their existence with his tools and his calloused hands. Even though they would never be viewed by the Jewish community as credible, godly, obedient sons and daughters of Abraham, they would still identify their son with the Jewish family through circumcision.

Joseph and Mary would refuse to acquiesce to perception. What about you?

Watch this couple carefully identify Jesus with the law of God, and ask yourself, "What does it take to keep me from submitting to the word of God?"

Does it take accusation? Does it take rumor? Does it take criticism, false accusation, pain, gossip, failure, or abandonment?

Will you obey God on the campus and invite ridicule? Will you forfeit a relationship because of your passion for holiness? Will you identify with the people of God even if it causes people at your job or in your family to believe that you have gone off the deep end, that you are really not as balanced as they thought you were?

What does it take for you to say, "If this is what running the race means, I'm going to sit this one out," or "If obeying God leads to this kind of misunderstanding or accusation or mistreatment, then

never mind," or "If doing the right thing causes so much discomfort, surely God will understand if I wiggle out of this one."

Ladies and gentlemen, it is against this backdrop of permanent discomfort that Joseph and Mary will not miss one step.

On the eighth day, these Jewish parents bring forward their little boy and send a message, "Even though everyone believes the boy is illegitimate, the result of fornication, this family and this boy will identify with the people of God, the word of God, and the will of God."

Notice verse 21 again, when Luke writes,
... ***His name was then called Jesus*** ...

This was the name chosen for Him before time began. The angel had come to both Mary and Joseph individually to tell them, "When the ceremony of identification comes, give Him the name Jesus."

To understand the significance of this name we have to travel back in time and take a look at the first person to have ever been given this name.

He was a young man at the time when his name was changed. He had been born into Egyptian slavery, along with all the other Hebrew slaves under Pharaoh's cruel reign. This little Jewish boy had been given the name as a sheer act of faith – the name Hoshea, which means "salvation".

G. Campbell Morgan, the late expositor, wrote that this name was a sigh and a hope. It was a sob from this boy's parents who, by faith, dared to believe in deliverance so strongly that they named their son "salvation".ⁱⁱⁱ

This was a boy who would eventually grow up to become the assistant to Moses, and Moses would change his name from Hoshea to Joshua. Simply taking letters out of the great name Yahweh, or Jehovah, and out of the name of the boy, Hoshea, Moses wove them into one name. This resulted in the young man's name becoming Yehoshua, or "Jehovah is salvation".

This name was shortened to Joshua, which is the Greek counterpart to the name in Hebrew, Yeshua, or Jesus. It carried the idea that the person who was so named would be the agent of salvation, the deliverer.

When Jesus was born, hundreds of little boys playing in the streets and villages throughout Israel were named Jesus. Their fathers or mothers held the vague notion that perhaps their son would play a role in the deliverance of Israel.

This little boy would. Jesus was and is the agent of salvation. He is both Jehovah and salvation.

I cannot help but wonder who was at the ceremony to hear the announcement of His name. Did the Jewish doctor stifle a yawn? Did a rabbi, who was perhaps present or performing the circumcision, shake his head at the audacity of this peasant couple with no references or attending family members actually believing their child, who was from all appearances evidently conceived in sin, could ever deliver anyone?

Jesus had come without fanfare to the nation. The hosts of heaven could not keep from bursting onto the scene, but their singing was limited to the back forty. The only ones who had seen and heard the celestial choir validate that the Deliverer, the Savior had indeed been born were shepherds, and they were not permitted to serve as witnesses in any Hebrew court.

Now, under the knife and into the covenant, the Deliverer has just identified with His people and they do not yet even know it. And Joseph and Mary, with their eight-day-old son still whimpering in pain, went back to their undisclosed home in Bethlehem.

This family had carefully met the demands of the law. They had observed the ceremony of identification.

2. The second ceremony was the ceremony of redemption.

Notice verse 22.

And when the days for their purification according to the law of Moses were completed, they brought Him up to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord

Now when we look back and read Leviticus chapter 12, we discover that the number of days of purification for the new mother of a male child was forty days. After seven days she could attend the ceremony of identification. Then, after waiting another thirty-three days, she could go to a priest and, with her husband, pay five shekels to redeem her son from priestly service. The parents effectively bought their son from God.

Notice verse 23.

(as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male that opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord")

God had a claim to the firstborn male. They were to be "holy," which means "separated unto God".

If the male child was from the tribe of Levi, he would serve as a priest in this theocracy. The priests were the government; they were the senators and representatives. The priests ran the religious and civil system, or at least as much as the Roman government allowed them during the days of Christ.^{iv}

This was effectively a draft, and there were no exceptions.

However, since Christ was born into the tribe of Judah, He was not required to serve in the priestly system. Because this was so, Joseph and Mary were able to pay the redemption tax, which Numbers 18 informs us was five shekels, and redeem Jesus back from God.

This was called the Redemption of the Firstborn.^v

Joseph and Mary had no idea of the irony of this redemption. They were buying Jesus back from God when Jesus had come to buy a people for God. They were redeeming the Redeemer.

Note, however, that for them, obeying this law would only add to their poverty. Joseph and Mary have already paid the census tax in Bethlehem and now, they are paying five shekels, which I understand to be several days' wages, in order to once again fulfill the letter of the law.

The will of God was taxing, tiring, uncomfortable, uneasy, lonely, and expensive. They were God's chosen couple to bear and raise the Redeemer. But so far, God had not paid them anything but a few angelic visits. This couple seemed to be paying at every turn.

To them, cost was never the issue – obedience was. Joseph and Mary were willing to meet and to pay the price for obedience.

This poor couple, in fact, was not required by law to bring Jesus to Jerusalem for this dedication. They could have paid the five shekels to a local priest and saved all the wear and tear.

They were going above and beyond. Joseph and Mary wanted to go to Jerusalem and to the temple itself to present Jesus to the priest and pay the redemption tax. Why? Because they realized that even though they were redeeming Jesus from priestly service, they were presenting Him to the Lord. Notice again the last phrase of verse 22.

. . . they brought Him up to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord

No one else knew who Jesus was, but they did. And they knew God did.

Note the irony again in that they are presenting the Lord to the Lord. Joseph and Mary did not understand this, and neither do we. In their childlike faith:

- they came to the center of worship and presented the Savior to the Sovereign;
- they dedicated God the Son to God the Father;
- they presented the Lamb of God to God;
- they brought the Lord of the Temple to the Temple of the Lord;^{vi}
- they brought the object of true worship to the house of worship;
- this virgin girl, leaning on the arm of a peasant carpenter, was in the Court of Women cradling the One who would rip down the curtain between mankind and the Holy of Holies;
- they, not knowing it yet, amidst the hubbub in the temple that day with hundreds of people milling around praying and burning incense and making sacrifices, brought Him, the Lamb, whom every ritual, sacrifice, and activity on the grounds illustrated, pointed to, longed for in view of the coming final sacrifice – there He was; He had come.

God became flesh and came to live among us, and even today, as many as receive Him – believe in Him alone; place their trust in His sacrifice alone for salvation – to them He gives the right to become infants – reborn babies – children belonging to God. (John 1:12, 14)

Joseph and Mary and their little one would have slipped back to Bethlehem had someone not noticed them.

So far, Mary and Joseph had carefully followed all that the law required and even more. They had attended the ceremony of identification and the ceremony of redemption. There was one more ceremony required by the law.

3. The third ceremony was the ceremony of purification.

According to the law, Mary was unclean following the birth of Jesus. After forty days she would be required to bring two sacrifices to the priest. One sacrifice or turtledove would atone for her defilement having delivered a child and issued blood. The second turtledove would restore her communion with God and allow her to participate in the temple.

The ideas that Mary was above the need for atonement and that she was received into heaven after living a life without sin are simply not in the Bible. She was in need of atonement. She was in need of a sacrifice for her uncleanness.

Notice verse 24.

And to offer a sacrifice according to what was said in the Law of the Lord, "A pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons."

Mary was bringing sacrifices – not for Jesus, not for Joseph, but for herself. In other words, bearing the perfect, sinless Son of God into the world did not make her sinless, but actually defiled her like any other newborn would any other woman.

Mary was not exempt from the law. In fact, she was now impure and could not worship or go near the temple for forty days.

According to the law, specifically given for a new mother in Leviticus chapter 12, Mary was to bring to the priest at the temple either a lamb and a pigeon or turtledove or two birds for these two sacrifices. If she and her husband did not have the money for a lamb, then she would be allowed to bring two pigeons or two turtledoves.

Turtledoves and pigeons were the only birds allowed by the law as sacrificial gifts.^{vii}

Lambs were much more expensive than pigeons. Turtledoves migrated and were harder to find, but just like today, pigeons were everywhere.

The fact that Mary brought birds instead of a lamb indicated their poverty.

She would have been ushered over to the gate nearest the Sanctuary just beyond the Court of Women. Mary would have presented her two birds and then watched from a distance as the smoke of her offering ascended to God.

As she stood there in the Court of Women watching the smoke of her sacrifice ascend, Mary held in her arms the final sacrifice. She could not afford to buy a lamb to give to the priest for an offering, but she had delivered into the world the Lamb for the final offering.

With this, they were finished. And Joseph and Mary might have slipped away and left unnoticed had God not designed two witnesses to be on hand to testify that the Messiah had come.

I will briefly mention Simeon.

Luke tells us in verse 25 that Simeon . . .

. . . was righteous and devout, looking for the consolation [the advocate; the counsel of defense] of Israel . . .

Some scholars believe Simeon was the son of the famous rabbi Hillel and the father of Gamaliel, the Apostle Paul's tutor. This was the Simeon who became the leading member of the Sanhedrin in A.D. 13. It is very intriguing that the *Mishna*, which is a commentary on the Jewish life and process, related the stories and accomplishments of all their great rabbis, but ignored Simeon. This is most likely because his faith in Jesus Christ would have been an embarrassment to them.^{viii}

It is not ironic that Simeon's name means, "hearing". And he was listening. In fact, verse 26 informs us that the Spirit of God had promised him that he would not die until he had seen the Messiah.

We can imagine that perhaps for years, Simeon would come to the temple looking at all the babies, thinking, "Is this the One? Maybe that's the child? They look like they're carrying a newborn, I wonder if he's the One."^{ix}

There is no telling how many young couples Simeon met and then, turned away, inwardly disappointed.

However, this was not the case when he met Joseph and Mary. The Spirit of God prompted Simeon that this newborn was indeed the Messiah. Notice verses 27-28.

And he came in the Spirit into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to carry out for Him the custom of the Law,

then he took Him into his arms, and blessed God . . .

This was the One!

Anna, a prophetess, came up later and began to tell everyone on the temple grounds who were also looking for the Redeemer. (Luke 2:36-38)

What incredible joy! What a commotion, what a disturbance of the peace there must have been throughout the temple grounds. I wish we were told of all the activity that followed.

There stands Simeon, holding the newborn. He says in verse 29,

Now Lord, You are releasing Your bond-servant to depart in peace, according to Your word;

In other words, "I'm ready to die now."

Why? Note further in verses 30-32,

For my eyes have seen Your salvation, which You have prepared in the presence of all peoples,

a light of revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel.

In other words, "I've seen the Savior, and now I'm prepared to die."

Literally translated, he is saying, "I've seen salvation with my own eyes, and now I can die in peace."

There is truth in this for all of us. None of us are ready to die until we have seen, by faith, the Savior; until we have held His truth to our hearts.

We are not ready to encounter the shadow of death unless we have seen the light of revelation in the person of this One, who is the Light of the world.

Are you prepared to die?

You are not until you have believed in this One – Jehovah Salvation; the Deliverer; Yeshua; Jesus Christ; the Messiah.

So there in the temple they are – Joseph, Mary, Anna, a few curious people, and Simeon holding the baby in his arms as tears, no doubt, ran down his cheeks. Mary and Joseph were probably even further mystified.

The priests went about their duties and the people brought their sacrifices and there, in the middle of it all, was the Lamb – God who had taken on flesh so He could die as the final sacrifice for sin and redeem His people forever.

The songwriter wrote of the newborn Messiah with these words:

Hope has hands

Freedom has feet

Truth will stand

The word will speak

The holy and the lowly will finally embrace

For love has a heartbeat

And grace has a face

Compassion has a tear

Joy has laughter

And here ever after

Peace has a smile

Redemption's blood has veins to flow in

*A temple to glow in
For light is a child*

| Imagine that, grace now has a face!

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- ⁱ “The Apocryphal Infancy Gospel of Thomas,” trans. and notes by M. R. James (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1924).
- ⁱⁱ J. Dwight Pentecost, The Words and Works of Jesus Christ (Zondervan, 1981), p. 62.
- ⁱⁱⁱ G. Campbell Morgan, The Gospel According to Luke (Fleming H. Revell, 1931), p. 40.
- ^{iv} John MacArthur, <http://www.gty.org/Resources/Sermons/42-48>.
- ^v William Barclay, The Gospel of Luke (Westminster Press, 1975), p. 24.
- ^{vi} Pentecost, p. 65.
- ^{vii} J. Reiling and J. L. Swellengrebel, A Translator’s Handbook on the Gospel of Luke (United Bible Society, 1971), p. 128.
- ^{viii} John Phillips, Exploring the Gospel of Luke (Kregel, 2005), p. 78.
- ^{ix} R. Kent Hughes, Luke: Volume 1 (Crossway, 1998), p. 95.
- ^x Phil Cross, “Hope has Hands” (Cameron Hill Music, 2001).