

JOURNEY WITH JESUS

A. THE PIONEER

2. Jesus the child

Among the many Messianic prophecies in the Old Testament is one given by the prophet Micah in **Micah 5:2** - "You, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times."

But that was 700 years ago. Mary had gone back home, and if she was doing much pondering she must have wondered who the prophet had been talking about. Could he possibly have meant her *son*? She and Joseph were living in their home town of Nazareth, up in the northern region of Galilee, a distance of 160 kilometres from Bethlehem. To go there would mean a gruelling journey of at least four days, and dangerous if one took the more direct route through unfriendly Samaria. Joseph, who was always so protective of her, would surely never consider such an ordeal at this stage!

But God had it all planned out. Luke the historian aligns his narrative with historical events, and tells us that Caesar Augustus (the first and regarded to be the greatest) Roman emperor, who had expanded the Roman empire beyond the Mediterranean world, made an initial decree that such a world should be catalogued by a census of the population. That meant that all citizens had to return to their ancestral home to register, including Joseph and Mary, who would have to travel to David's city of Bethlehem with no "ifs" or "buts".

And so the young couple had to make the perilous trip. Hopefully, with Mary's pregnancy advanced, Joseph was able to provide a donkey for her to ride. Mind you, they were possibly not on their own; other members of their families, also in David's line, would have had to make the same journey. Contrary to many dramatists, they did not arrive in Bethlehem with Mary already in labour. **Luke 2:6** says that while they were there, the time came for the baby to be born. Joseph would have been able to find a midwife for her and perhaps her own sister was there to be a tower of support; that sister was to still stand with Mary at the cross as Jesus died.

We shudder to think of the rough and unhygienic conditions in which Mary had to cope with the new experience of childbirth, but actually her consignment to a stable at least gave her more privacy than she would have had bunking down with the rest of the inside guests on the floor in the one large room! Did she feel the angel's message was a little tarnished as she lay that special baby in an animals' feeding trough?

How hard is it to see God's leading when circumstances are uncomfortable? Think of other Bible "greats" - did any of them have an easy life? What about the thousands of Christians suffering persecution today?

We wonder at the mixture of feelings that must have flowed around that stable! Along with the supreme joy of a new life safely delivered there may have been some nagging questions begging to be answered. Did Joseph, gazing at Mary's new-mum euphoria, wonder - just wonder a little bit - if it was all really true? Would we be shocked at a glitch in his faith? A fleeting moment of doubt would make him no worse than any of us who after years of enjoying goodness sink in doubt at a moment of crisis.

But suddenly there is a noise, a disturbance at the inn. A little group of shepherds, bursting with excitement, tumbles into the stable. We read from **Luke 2:16**.

"Here he is! Look! In a manger, just like the angel said!" "Ohhh! He's just a baby! We don't have to be frightened!" "But he's Christ the Lord! That's what the angel told us. We should bow ourselves down to him!"

All at once they were kneeling in the hay, heads bowed, hands clasped together in ecstasy. And then they noticed the bemused Mary and Joseph staring at them. One who appeared to be the leader hastened to apologise for the intrusion, with interjections babbling over from the others who just could not keep their mouths shut as they told their story.

They were outside in the dark with the sheep when suddenly this angel was there right in front of them, all sort of lit up. Of course they panicked but the angel told them not to be afraid because he had good news for everybody about this baby that was just born in the city of David, and he was Christ the Lord. "You go and see him; you'll know he's the one because he's lying all wrapped up in a manger!" And then all these angels came and they were sort of laughing and singing "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favour rests."

I imagine that Mary and Joseph - and maybe her sister and anyone else who was there - could do nothing but stare at each other in wonder. God who had blessed these shepherds with such wonderful news, had shown himself to be the Shepherd that the faithful Joseph and Mary needed. Within their own circle of family and friends the vicious tongues would now stop wagging.

The next few verses are important in that they link this new age of Grace with the age of the Law, and in keeping the law, Mary and Joseph received encouraging confirmation that the Baby Jesus was indeed the fulfilment of the Law and that he would usher in the Age of Grace. This marked a tremendous turning point in the way man could enter and enjoy a meaningful relationship with God. Jesus had to undergo three ancient ceremonies obligatory to every Jewish male.

In **verse 21** Jesus was circumcised on his eighth day, in keeping with the law. Contrary to the custom of perpetuating names within the family Joseph called this firstborn "Jesus" as the angel had instructed him "because he will save his people from their sins." It is interesting to note that on the eighth day of a baby's life the blood clotting agents in the body soar up to 110%, subsiding to normal on the 9th day. Our law-giving Creator understands our bodies!

The second ceremony was the Redemption of the Firstborn. According to the Law, every firstborn male, both of humans and of cattle, was sacred to God. To allow for this, there was a ceremony called the Redemption of the Firstborn, where for 5 shekels the parents could "buy back" their son from God. This money was to be paid to the priests as soon as practicable after 31 days from the birth of the child. It is highly significant that Mary and Joseph "took Jesus to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord" (**verse 22**) because in a unique way Jesus was totally consecrated to God: he was not only Mary's firstborn but, as **Colossians 1:15** tells us, "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation." God's firstborn, dedicated to Him as the firstborn of a woman!

The third ceremony was the Purification after Childbirth. A woman could not enter the Temple for 40 days after the birth of a boy or 80 days after the birth of a girl. At that time she had to bring to the Temple a lamb for a burnt offering and a dove or a young pigeon for a sin offering. If she could not afford the lamb, she was allowed to bring instead 2 young pigeons, the Offering of the Poor. It was this offering that Mary brought (**verse 24**); Jesus was born into an ordinary home, a home with no luxuries but just the daily struggle to make a living enough for the necessary food and clothing. We marvel at the extent to which Jesus humbled himself for us! Paul marvelled at this years later when, in **2 Corinthians 8:9** he wrote, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor."

Verses 25-35 show us the devout Simeon, waiting for the "consolation of Israel" - the same word that Jesus used much later when he described the Holy Spirit as the "Paraclete" – in Greek, one called alongside to help. So it is significant that "the Holy Spirit was upon him" and it was the Holy Spirit Who had revealed that he would see the Lord's Christ (Messiah) before he died, and again, "moved by the Holy Spirit, he went into the temple courts" at the exact moment when Mary and Joseph arrived with baby Jesus. And Simeon, righteous as to the Law, now saw a foretaste of the Age of Grace - "my eyes have seen Your salvation"- and that this grace would be for all men "a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." I love to think of the reaction of Mary and Joseph! After the weeks of trauma what an encouragement that must have been to them both! Here this godly man, a stranger to them, *knew* that their Baby was special! He even knew something of this Baby's mission – that, confronted with the Saviour Jesus, men would fall at the conviction of their sins but would rise again through faith in his forgiveness. And in the graciousness of God, He sent a second confirmation in the form of the prophetess Anna, the first woman to preach the gospel in the Age of Grace!

In today's world we worship youth and often fail to respect the wisdom of the aged. Simeon must have been quite old and we know Anna was 84. Yet these two had the privilege of being the first to tell the good news that Jesus would usher in the Age of Grace. The Bible has many stories of such aged folk who were vital to the carrying out of God's purposes. Maybe there are older folk in your own life to whom you owe a debt of gratitude for their faithfulness in some caring for you. Repay them while they are still here!

According to the story in **Matthew chapter 2** Joseph and Mary stayed in Bethlehem for two more years and received one more encouraging visit. **Verse 1** tells of "Magi" or wise men from the east who came to Jerusalem on a mission. "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him."

And here we need to throw away the Christmas card picture of three lonely camel-riders following a star in the night sky. Their gifts show these pilgrims were fabulously wealthy and no-one in their right mind would have travelled what could have been 1500 kilometres through lonely country with just two companions. There would have been a comfortable company of them together with servants to look after riders, camels and security! And neither did they follow that famous star for the entire journey. It appeared once to them at home and their ancient wisdom told them it gave a significant message, whereupon with no further guidance they had enough faith to make the perilous journey in order to give the new king their worship. It was their own calculations, not the star, that took them to Jerusalem, but once having been given specific directions they were overjoyed to see the star they *had seen* in the east and followed it faithfully to the house (not the stable) in Bethlehem to worship the toddler Jesus. Their gifts of gold, incense and myrrh must have amounted to a small fortune - enough to support the little family for their escape to Egypt to avoid the clutches of Herod.

Warned in a dream by an angel, Joseph took his family on that dramatic night-time journey and we wonder what childish traumas Jesus went through in a strange land, without the contact and love shown by the usual extended family, and with Mary most likely pregnant again. Then the return to Israel and Joseph's fear of the authorities, sending him for refuge back to his own home town of Nazareth. Whatever, we know that, as the Son of God, the childhood of Jesus was sinless. As for Mary, it seems she did her part well in bringing up her boy. **Luke 2:40** says he grew and became strong, thanks to wise and loving care. It also says he was filled with wisdom and the grace of God was upon him, as a sign of God's blessing on her special child. What a wonderful eldest child he must have been! Did Mary get a shock when her next child was born as a normal demanding infant?

On to **Luke 2:41-52**. All Jewish males were required by law to go to Jerusalem for the great festival of Passover, and by New Testament times women also attended. A Jewish boy became a man at the age of 12: he became a "son of the Law" and had to take the obligations of the Law

upon himself. And so it was that Jesus made what was probably his first visit to Jerusalem in this passage. What must he have felt at his first sight of the Temple? By the age of 10 he would, like any average Jewish boy, have known the Pentateuch by heart. He would no doubt have realised the significance of the temple building, the garments and rituals of the priests, and the great celebration of the Passover. We wonder how much Mary had confided in him the nature of his own miraculous birth. Did he realise as he saw the lambs sacrificed, that he was indeed the "Lamb of God", who was to take away the sin of the world?

The ceremony of his "coming of age" would have been quite solemn and impressive: a special robe would have been given him along with an appropriate exhortation. Was it at this time that Jesus discovered his own unique relationship with God? Remember that Jesus never *became* holy: he *was* holy, sinless, perfect, from birth. If at any time in his life he had sinned, he would not have been the sufficient sacrifice for us. The Lamb had to be spotless. Would he have realised that his attitude to God and to life was radically different from that of those around him? Did he, at worship in that significant Temple, realise that in one sense he had "come home?" If so, it seems he was reluctant to leave again. At Passover it was the custom for the Sanhedrin to meet in public in the Temple court to discuss, in the presence of all who would listen, religious and theological questions. And here was Jesus, an avid student, and not in any way a precocious smart-alec, just soaking up their learning with an eagerness and insight that amazed his teachers.

It is not surprising that Mary and Joseph travelled a whole day before missing Jesus. The travellers would have all kept together in caravan for security, and the women would have left first, as they were slower, with the men leaving later and catching up to the women by nightfall. Mary would have supposed that Jesus was with Joseph, and Joseph would have thought he was with Mary. Perhaps after 12 years, the wonder of his birth had become somewhat ordinary to them. Perhaps they were guilty of regarding him as just a natural child and had grown careless of their precious responsibility.

It was a natural mistake, yet a warning for us. How easy it is, when we have grown up within the life of a church, to "suppose he is in our company" - in fact, to take him for granted. We need to take stock from time to time - are we really in company with Jesus?

You often see a parent, when at last finding a lost child, to be quite angry with relief! It was so with Mary as she scolded Jesus, "Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you." But her outburst was met with a gentle reproof. Her "your father" was corrected kindly but definitely by Jesus as he took the name "father" from Joseph and gave it to its rightful bearer, God. "Didn't you know I had to be in my *Father's* house?" It seems most likely that now the realisation had come to him of who he really was. Although they didn't understand, this was the beginning of the parting of their ways.

Yet his dawning awareness did not make Jesus proud. Like a good Jewish son, he went back with them to Nazareth, a town despised, to make himself "of no reputation", to submit to six to eight years of apprenticeship as a carpenter, and as the Son of God, to learn obedience to the very guardians whom he, with God, had created! Joseph as well as Mary would have had a major role in training the young Jesus. Together they would have gone into the forest to cut down trees for their wood-working, and Jesus would have developed a strong physique which would have stood him in good stead for his arduous years of itinerant ministry. As he grew, Jesus would have been conscious of the love and responsibility that goes with a normal contented family - all the ideals which he later sought to incorporate into the minds of his disciples, the beginning of his own great family, the Church.

Above all, his Father was pleased with him: the story concludes with "And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and men". Small wonder that Mary "treasured all these things in her heart."

Where is the first and best place for a child to learn obedience, respect and self-control? Do you see God's divine plan for instituting families? Do we grasp the serious responsibilities we have as parents? A wise evangelist once warned that when a child becomes a Christian, he doesn't stop being a child. We all have to learn and grow into spiritual maturity. Yet as the perfect Child, Jesus left us a good example to follow.

But does this story of Jesus begin with his childhood? Mark, more concerned with action than with history, begins his story at the start of Jesus' ministry - his baptism by John. Matthew looks back beyond that - in fact, to Abraham, the founder of the nation Israel, God's chosen race to whom - and from whom - would come God's chosen Son. Luke goes back even further, beyond Israel to the beginning of mankind, and so to mankind's Creator. But John goes back beyond them all, to the eternity before the creation of man. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning." (**John 1:1**) So it is with eagerness that we will follow the story of this wonderful Son of God as he came to our world, becoming Man for us so that we ourselves might become children of his Father, God.