

The Bible tells the story of Jesus' birth so quickly that it is easy for us to miss much of the drama, or even fail to understand the story, if we are not familiar with the rest of the Bible. Therefore, I am retelling the story here for you in more detail to help you enjoy this amazing story which is at the heart of the Christmas season.

The Story of Christmas

retold by Len Andyshak

Two thousand years ago, the Jewish people looked at the night sky and cried out to God. They cried out in pain and anger. Since ancient times, they had been expecting the birth of God's promised Savior who would finally bring God's kingdom to this earth. Now they were in a dark time. The armies of Rome had conquered the world and Israel was again a nation enslaved to a more powerful country. Their great desire was for God to send the savior. They longed for a powerful warrior who would smash their enemies and deliver them from their oppressors -- but one day led only to the next with no answer from God.

Mary was a simple peasant girl, perhaps 15 or 16 years old, who lived in the small, unimportant village of Nazareth. As a child, she went with her mother to the Jerusalem temple where she learned to pray and live a holy life. One day Mary looked up from her work and drew back in fear. There before her stood a tall man shining like light – an angel. The angel saw her fear and spoke gently to her, "Don't be afraid. God is pleased with you and has chosen you to be the mother of His son." Then he continued with an amazing message. "You will have a son and you are to call his name Jesus. He will rule over God's people forever, and His kingdom will never end." When she heard this, Mary was confused. "How can this be?" she asked. The angel replied, "God will come to you and He will make this happen. And so the child will be called 'the son of God'." Mary was amazed and quiet. And then she said, "I am the Lord's servant. Let it be as you have said."

The custom of those days was for parents to arrange the marriage of their daughters at an early age. Mary's parents had promised her to a man named Joseph. However, before Mary was married to Joseph she became pregnant as the angel had promised. This news spread like a fire through the small town. This meant shame and disgrace for Mary's family. "How could such a good daughter do this? And she insists that she has not made love to any man – that this baby is from God!"

It was a lonely time for Mary. A time of wonder, but also of pain and tears. What the angel had said had come true. She felt God's closeness and approval. Yet each day she also felt the disapproval of her family and friends. And then there was Joseph. He was angry and crushed by this news. "How could Mary betray me like this? Does she love another man instead of me?" However, he was a kind person and decided to simply cancel their marriage quietly to protect Mary from more public shame. But one night, as he was sleeping, the same angel who had appeared to Mary visited him. He told Joseph that Mary's baby was not the son of any man, but the son of God. Like Mary, he had been chosen to care for this child and was to name him Jesus (which means salvation) because he would save his people from their disobedience to God. When the angel left, Joseph sat

in the dark room thinking about what the angel had said. Even though this seemed impossible, and may expose him to the same shame Mary felt, he believed the angel and took Mary as his wife.

Soon after they were married, Joseph and Mary were at home in Nazareth when some of the hated Roman soldiers marched into the town. The soldiers came to the market place where the people gathered and called for the people to listen to them. "I bring a message from your emperor. Caesar demands to know how many people live in his kingdoms, so all of you must return to the city of your birth to be counted and to register as taxpayers." Joseph was a descendant of the ancient king David and had been born in the small town of Bethlehem, which was nearly 100 miles from Nazareth. He and Mary began to make preparations for the long, hard trip there to be registered, as the soldiers demanded. This was very interesting because now Jesus would be born, not in Nazareth, but in Bethlehem and an ancient prophecy would come true. Hundreds of years before, God's prophets had said that the Savior would be born in the city of Bethlehem and that his father would be a descendant of King David.

Joseph wished that Mary did not have to make the long trip at such a difficult time. He also knew that she was afraid. However, she was not accepted any longer in the community, and he also wanted to be with her to help her when the baby was born. He helped Mary climb onto the donkey's back. Then he led the donkey slowly away from their home, down the streets of Nazareth and into the countryside.

Far away, in lands beyond Israel, three men studied the stars. They believed that in the skies were signs from God, and tonight their attention was focused on one special star which had only recently appeared in the heavens. They were filled with wonder and excitement because they were sure that this star was the sign of a powerful new king who was about to be born. Therefore, even before Mary and Joseph had begun their trip, these three men began an even longer journey, following a star in search of this king whose birth was written in the stars. They were also on their way to Bethlehem.

Mary and Joseph traveled slowly, and stopped to rest whenever Mary felt tired. Occasionally they would see other families on the road who were also making the journey from distant towns to obey the emperor's decree. Their journey will take them nearly a week. The road climbs over hills, down rocky trails, through dry and dusty plains. The stones hurt Joseph's feet and the sun makes Mary drowsy. How she longed to stretch out on a soft bed. She prays that God's will keep them safe. After many days the road becomes steeper and more crowded. Suddenly someone calls out and points to the sparkle of a golden roof reflecting the sunlight still ten miles away and high above them – they are nearing Jerusalem. Mary sighs with relief. Here she will be able to rest the night at her cousin's home and the next day will be the last day of their long journey.

Though Mary and Joseph did not know it, the three men who studied the stars had arrived in Jerusalem only yesterday. They had followed a star to this mountainous region of Israel and now had come to the capital city to ask about the new king for whom they were searching. "Surely the leaders and priests will know of this king and be able to direct us to

him." They were quickly noticed as foreigners and soon caught the attention of even King Herod as news of their story spread. Their talk of a star and a new king who would rule forever created excitement as people thought of the ancient prophecies of a Savior. King Herod also wondered secretly whether such a king would mean the end of his own power and rule. He would use all of his power and all of his deceit to prevent this from ever happening. He called the priests and asked where the ancient prophets had said the Savior would be born. "In Bethlehem", they answered. Herod then secretly had the strange star-watchers brought to him. "The prophecies say that Bethlehem is the place you are seeking. It is only five miles distant. Go and search for this child and if you find him return and tell me at once, so that I may come and worship him." The men thanked the king and left at once. They did not know that Herod intended not to worship the child, but to destroy him.

While the strangers talked with Herod, Mary and Joseph were nearing the gates of Bethlehem. The narrow streets were crowded. Men tugged and shouted at donkeys heavily loaded with belongings from their long trips. Everyone looked weary from their travels and from anger at paying even more taxes to the enemies who controlled their country. Mary's birth pains had already started and she knew the baby would be born soon. "Thank you for bringing us through this journey", she prayed. Joseph looked up at Mary and smiled. "We will find a place soon and you can rest", he said. He was thankful to be here, but was worried because of Mary's pain and how little time they had to prepare for the baby's birth.

Joseph stopped at the first inn they saw, but it was already filled with travelers. They went on to the next inn and to the next. The city was swarming with people and no place seemed to be available. The sun was low on the horizon and a chill was in the air. Mary pulled her cloak over her head against the cold and rested her hand on Joseph's shoulder to steady herself as the donkey walked along. Joseph began to be more anxious and hurried on from place to place looking for somewhere to spend the night. Finally, as another innkeeper was telling Joseph that he had no rooms, he noticed Mary hold her stomach and close her eyes as she focused on the pain. He realized that he must do something for this young girl and her desperate husband. "I have no rooms, but there is a stable for the animals behind the house. It will be warm, and quiet. Take your wife there. We can make it comfortable for her." As evening came and the stars began to appear, a young girl cried out in pain as she lay in the corner of a stable on a bed of straw. Her young husband watched anxiously, asking for God's help - and Jesus was born. They washed him, wrapped him in clean strips of cloth, Mary held him and talked gently to him as all new mothers do -- and as he fell asleep, they laid him on some straw in the box which usually held the animal's food.

A special star was in the sky over Bethlehem that night and the star-watchers were on their way, bringing gifts they hoped to give to a king who would reign forever. And in the fields around Bethlehem some men sat under the stars watching over their flocks of sheep. Their thoughts were not on special stars, or great kings in ancient prophecy, or even the business of Bethlehem this day. They lived outside of the city with their flocks and were not welcomed by the people of the town. They were usually excluded from the religious activities of the community, but at that moment God came to them. Suddenly the night

sky exploded with a blazing light. The startled men covered their eyes and fell backwards at the surprise. As they looked up, they saw an angel in the midst of the light. "Don't be afraid", the angel said. "I bring you wonderful news! Tonight a baby has been born in Bethlehem. He is God's Savior - Christ the Lord. You will find him in a stable, lying in a manger." Before the men could say anything, the light was filled with many, many angels praising God. "Glory to God, peace on earth and blessing to all men!" they sang. Then the singing faded and the light was gone. The stars watched silently and the men listened and waited in wonder at what had happened. Finally, they began to speak quietly. "What should we do? Did you hear what they said?!" "Angels – those were angels." "They said the Savior has been born - here in Bethlehem. Let's go and find Him!"

The shepherds hurried into the town. They began searching from stable to stable and telling the story of what had happened to everyone they met. People wondered what their story meant. Some followed them in their search. Three men who studied the stars were also in Bethlehem that night, asking about a newly born King. People also puzzled at these strange foreigners and wondered what this could mean. The foreigners said the child was the one spoken of in the prophecies who was born to be the Savior who would reign over God's people forever.

At last, some who searched found Mary and Joseph with their newly-born baby in a stable with the animals, just as the angels had told them. He seemed so tiny, wrapped tightly and sleeping soundly like any other baby. He slept as though the world had not waited thousands of years for this night, as though he were no one special at all. But the shepherds knew that this was more than just another baby. The angels had come to announce his birth. They watched quietly and whispered among themselves. Some knelt and thanked God for what He would do through this child. Now three more visitors arrived. They were foreigners. As they entered the stable they bowed before the child and the parents. "We have come to honor your child who will be king of his people. We have followed his star and bring you our gifts." Mary and Joseph marveled at these visitors and their stories. They remembered the angel who had visited them and now it seemed that his words were coming true. Already they sensed that this was more than just their baby. This was the Son of God! They wondered what would happen next as God fulfilled His plan through the life of Jesus.

The shepherds returned to their sheep that night praising God for the new hope He had given them. The star-watchers began the long journey home. All of those who saw the child that night knew they had seen something special, yet none understood just how important this evening had been. This baby was God Himself - become a man. He would live and teach in such a way that we would know the truth about God and about ourselves. He would show us how life can be full and wonderful, even in this broken world. And He would die to pay for our disobedience and make our forgiveness possible. The story of Christmas is the beginning of the story of how God came to give us life and hope and peace. I hope this story helps you to understand God's love a bit more - and that you have a wonderful Christmas season.