

The Lord born in Bethlehem

A close-up photograph of a person's hand, wearing a white shirt cuff and a grey suit sleeve, resting on a dark brown leather-bound Bible. The Bible is lying flat on a wooden surface. The word 'BIBLE' is embossed in gold on the spine and the front cover. The background is a warm, brown gradient with subtle circular patterns.

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Please read beforehand:

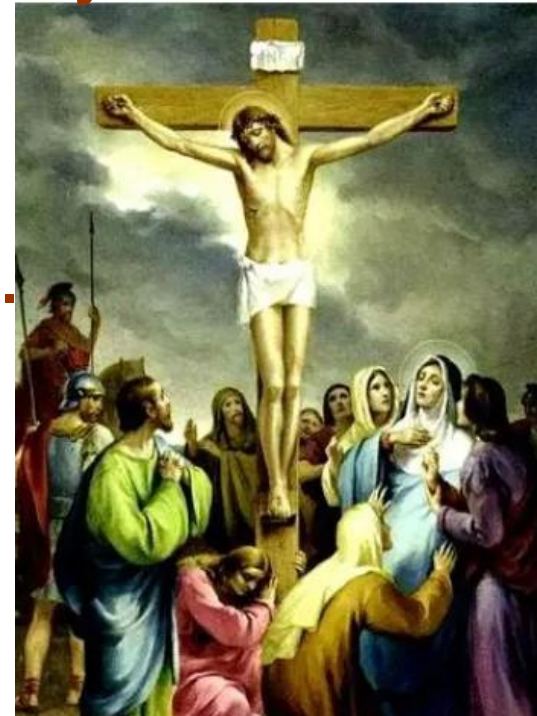
“But you, Bethlehem Ephratah, though you be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to me the one to be ruler in Israel, whose goings forth have been from old, from everlasting.”



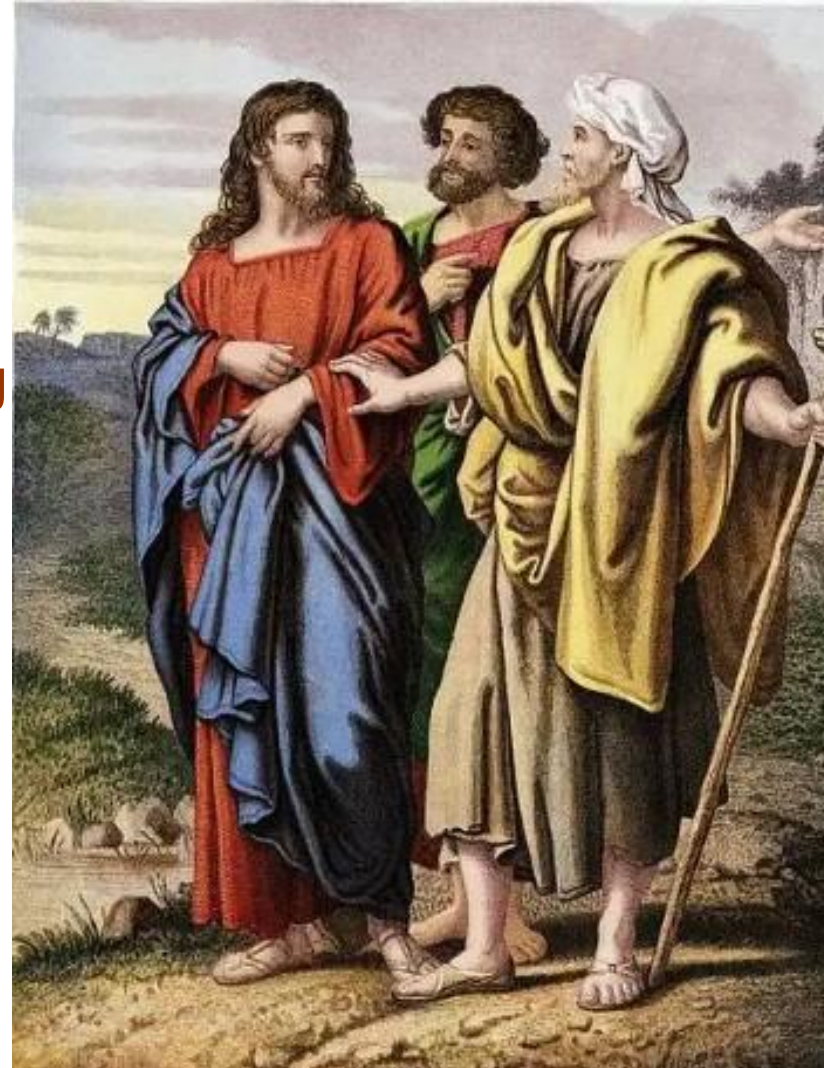
In the late afternoon of the day of the Lord's resurrection, two of His disciples, who had been in Jerusalem over that weekend, were returning to their village, which was called Emmaus, a few miles away.

**On their way home, they were discussing the events that had taken place, Jesus having been brutally crucified on the Friday, the fear that had descended on His followers, causing them to hide behind locked doors, and then reports from those who visited the tomb in which His body had been placed, that they had seen a vision of angels "who said He was alive."
(Luke 24:23).**

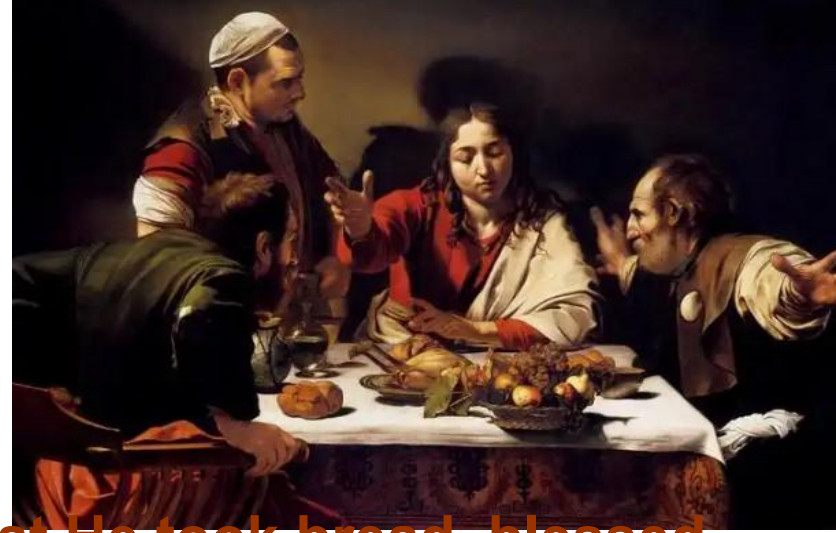
Clearly they were not convinced. They had, as they said, hoped that Jesus would raise a rebellion and drive out the occupying Romans and set up an earthly kingdom here in this world.



As they walked along someone who they must have thought was a stranger joined them. It was the risen Jesus. And after listening to their disappointment, He, Whose identity was still unknown to them, said, “O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets had spoke! Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory? And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself.”



It cannot have been too long before these disciples, along with the Stranger, arrived home and they invited Him in to eat with them. “Now it came to pass, as He sat at the table with them, that He took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they knew Him, and He vanished from their sight.”



Within an hour these two disciples hurried back to Jerusalem and told the remaining eleven disciples what had happened, and even as they talked the risen Jesus appeared in their midst. And whilst gently, He upbraided all of them for not understanding what He had told them while He was still with them, and before His crucifixion that He – as the Messiah – was the fulfillment of “all things which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms.”



Obviously, this would have included the prophecies about the coming of the Messiah. But not only the prophecies. **The whole of the Old Testament** holds within it, at the deepest level of meaning, a laying out – especially before the angels – **of the life of the Messiah**; an absolute and detailed unfolding of what it would be like.

But for now let's pick up on the prophecies, some, if not many, of which you already know. Bible scholars have identified three hundred and thirty-two Old Testament prophecies about the coming of the Messiah. (See <https://www.considerthegospel.org>>a humble king)



The first of these prophecies was given at the time of the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. The last appears in the final book of the Old Testament, Malachi, and it is a prophecy that the coming of the Messiah would be preceded by the coming of a messenger who, in fact, was John the Baptist. (Malachi 3:1)

The earliest of the prophecies of the coming of the Messiah are quite vague. Just think for a moment about the first, already mentioned, from Genesis Chapter 3 where the Lord God warns the serpent who had deceived Eve, “ And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.” (Verse 15)



But as the centuries passed the prophecies became more explicit. The hope of the coming of the Messiah had to be kept alive. And it was because the Old Testament Jews were becoming more and more external, greater and greater detail and clarity needed to be given. In that sense we might think of the prophecies as clues that **needed to be clearer and clearer as time passed by.**

Some six hundred years before the coming of the Messiah, when most of the renowned prophets of the Old Testament were active, such really specific details had been given such as that,

- ◆ He would be a descendant of David (Jeremiah 23:5);
- ◆ that He would be born of a virgin (Isaiah 7:14);
- ◆ that He would **be God come on earth** (Isaiah 9:6 and Isaiah 25:9);



◆ that His work on earth would involve **warfare** (Isaiah 29:3, 4 and 34:5);

◆ that He would establish **a new highway** along which to walk life's journey (Isaiah 35:8)

◆ that He would heal the lame, the blind and the deaf (Isaiah 35:5,6) and release prisoners from the prison (Isaiah 42:7);

◆ that He would preach good tidings to the poor (Isaiah 61:1)

◆ that He would one day enter Jerusalem riding on a donkey, a colt, a foal of a donkey. (Zechariah 9:6)

◆ that He would **suffer because of our sinfulness** (Isaiah 53:4-6 and Zechariah 12:12)

and

◆ that He would be born in **Bethlehem**. (Micah 5:6)



Why Bethlehem?

The obvious answer is that because He was, through Joseph, a descendant of David and Bethlehem was the ancestral home of all of David's descendants. For very good reason, then, it was known as "the city of David". (Luke 2:4)

And here is another question: having such incredibly important work to do on earth how could it be that Jesus was not born, in Bethlehem, into of place of warmth, comfort and welcome?

By way of an answer to this second question the Writings provide the answer: "If it had pleased the Lord", we read, "He might have been born in the most splendid palace, and been laid in a bed adorned with precious stones, but this would have been among those such as were in no doctrine of truth, and there would have been no heavenly representation." ("Apocalypse Explained" 706:12). Apart from the representation, or the



But let us return to His birth in Bethlehem. We know now that Jesus was born at Bethlehem because as a descendant (as was supposed) of king David Joseph, with Mary, were required to return there for a census ordered by the Roman emperor, Caesar Augustus.

But Bethlehem is highly significant at a much deeper level and this directly concerns us today.

If, as we hope, Jesus is going to be born into our lives **it can only be in the Bethlehem which each of us, hopefully, has within us.**



Bethlehem was located in the Old Testament tribal territory of Benjamin; a region midway between the tribal territories of Ephraim and Judah. And this is highly symbolic.

Judah symbolises our heart; Ephraim symbolises our head, or understanding. It is where head and heart, or understanding and love for what we understand, meet, that we find Bethlehem. **It is where what we understand of the Lord's teachings in the Word meets in partnership with our determination to apply these to our daily life; that the Lord is born.**

Bethlehem



We read, from “True Christian Religion”,

“The Lord is perpetually present with all people, wicked as well as good, for no one could live without His presence. But His coming is restricted to those who receive Him, and these are those who believe in Him and keep His commandments. It is the Lord’s perpetual presence which gives a person the faculty of reason and the ability to become spiritual. This is brought about by the light which comes from the Lord as the sun of the spiritual world, which a person can receive in his or her understanding. That light is the truth which gives him the power of understanding. The Lord’s coming, however, takes place with a person who combines heat with that light, that is combines love with truth.
(paragraph 774)

What does it mean to “combine love with truth”?

It means to have enthusiasm for the truth we know; to feel excited about it; to have come to the conclusion that it holds the key to happiness and to living with



In another passage in the Writings it says that Bethlehem means to be “**eager for good and to be filled with longing for truth**”. (“Apocalypse Explained” 449:3)

I ask myself, “Am I eager for good and do I have a deep down longing for truth?” Would you say of yourself, that “**you are eager for good and have a deep down longing for truth?**”

To the extent that we have such eagerness and longing, deep down, sincerely felt and always with us, these **have developed over many years**. And they have developed because we have been willing to look into ourselves, recognized what needs changing about ourselves, repented of the different sins we have discovered, and so came to realize how great our need for the Lord to be in our lives is. Such eagerness and longing is born out of **self-examination and honesty about ourselves** and from **our honesty and acceptance** of how empty and even pointless our life is without the Lord

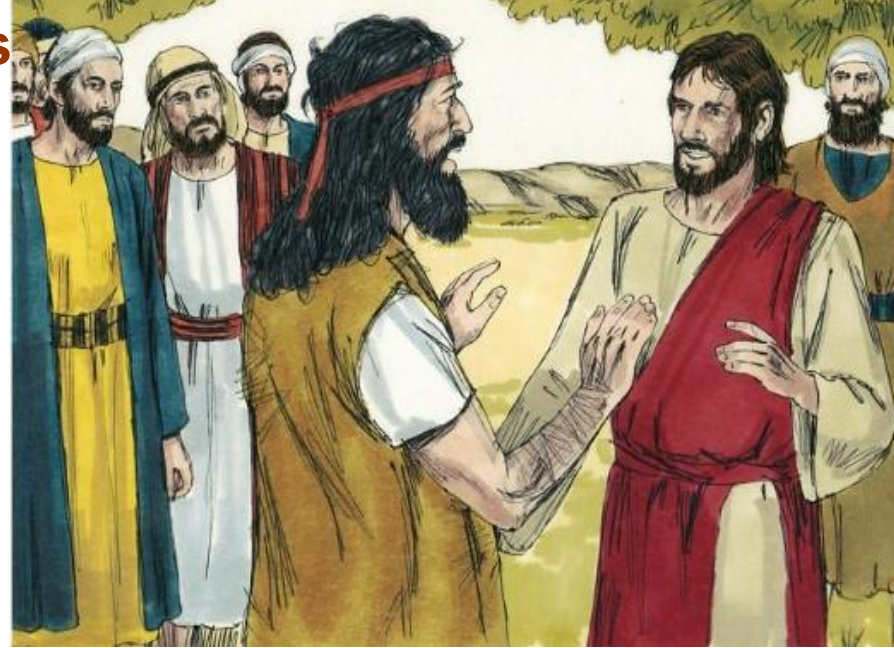


As an example, just think of complaint and dis-satisfaction and our wanting more of what this world can offer. And for things to be different from what they are. **Such complaint and dis-satisfaction is a feature of fallen human nature.**

Soon after the ancient Jews were taken into captivity by the conquering Babylonians they started complaining about where they found themselves to be. They wanted things to be different but were told through the prophet Jeremiah to **be satisfied with with where they were and what they had.** (See Jeremiah 29:4-7)



And in the Gospels we read of a man stepping forward from the crowd and complaining to Jesus about his brother who would not divide the inheritance with him. Jesus was not



interested in settling the dispute but said something we all need to hear. “And He said to them (the man and the crowd more generally), ‘**Take heed and beware of covetousness**, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of things he possesses.’” (Luke 12:15)

The question we need to ask of ourselves is, “**How enthusiastic am I not just to know this but to live, sincerely accepting of my circumstances?** And, another question, Do I take to heart what the Commandments about coveting really mean?



There is so much in life we cannot have. This applies to all of us. At such times are we able to affirm our trust in the Lord? Are we able to combine love - meaning a willing acceptance - with the truth? If we are then, spiritually, this is Bethlehem, and the Lord is able to be born there.

With the Lord's help there are countless opportunities to make it possible for Bethlehem to exist within us and **so create an inner, spiritual state, in which the Lord can be born. When we are,**



◆ moved to **help** someone in need, because this is what the Lord would want us to do, this is Bethlehem, and the Lord is able to be born there

◆ when we give credit where it is due, or **acclaim** for someone's achievement, and we do it genuinely, this is Bethlehem, and the Lord can be born there.

◆ when we choose to **refuse to be involved** with any slanderous comments about another person, because this is what in the Bible says we should do, this is Bethlehem, and the Lord is able to be born there.

◆ when a married person **absolutely and resolutely refuses to** think, longingly, of another person outside of the marriage, this is Bethlehem, and the Lord can be born there.

◆ when a person **refuses any dishonest dealings**, even with regard to paying taxes, this is Bethlehem, and the Lord can be born there.



Opposition

Against the background of the Lord's birth at Bethlehem all those centuries ago there was opposition. And the opposition was personified in the king, Herod, who feared competition for his throne. In fact, so obsessed did Herod become that he ordered the slaughter of all the boy children in Bethlehem from two years old and under. (Matthew 2:16-18). It was an instance of unspeakable brutality. And yet it was remembered and, and under the Lord's divine Providence, recorded in the Gospels to be forever a reminder to us of **the opposition to Jesus being born in states of Bethlehem within us**. Herod was a devil. And it is devils, meaning evil spirits, who resort to extreme strategies to keep things as they are. They loathe the prospect of losing control of us. The last thing they want is a competitor, and they will do everything they can to kill off the possibility of **the Lord growing to become the most crucial and important influence in our lives**.



We need to know that “As soon as evil spirits detect even the smallest thing (of a spiritual nature) that people love, of what is delightful and precious to them, they attack it instantly and try to destroy it.” (“Arcana Caelestia” 1820:2) And they use sinister strategies, and stealth, just as Herod did, pretending to be interested in worshiping the baby Jesus but in his heart he had absolutely no intention of doing so. As is so appropriately taught us, relevant to Herod's brutality and the way evil spirits attack us, “**Evil hides in itself all cunning and wickedness.**” (“Apocalypse Explained” 581L:3)



Such attacks by evil spirits are what we feel as temptations. And it is at such times that we are caused to **re-evaluate our understanding of the Lord and of His place in our lives**. And it is this re-evaluation that is meant by Joseph and Mary taking Jesus and fleeing with Him to Egypt.

As to how long they stayed in Egypt no one knows. But after Mary, Joseph and Jesus returned to Israel they went and lived, unobtrusively, in Nazareth where Jesus grew to be a man and where He prepared for His public ministry which He began “at about thirty years of age”. (Luke 3:23).



The birth of Jesus is one thing. However it is the beginning of a process, not the end. **It is only by stages that Jesus' presence and influence in our lives grows and spreads.** The time will come when He will speak into our hearts insights which will astound us and which will confound worldly and sense-based thinking. This is what is meant by Jesus, as a boy of twelve, sitting in the Temple with Jewish scholars, His answers amazing them.



And then the time will come when His presence will be of such strength with us that He can challenge and heal our waywardness, sicknesses and sinfulness which up to that point have remained undisturbed but which need to be identified and overcome. And though He will gather a following, from within us, of things that are good and true, meant by the disciples, yet opposition to Him will become more and more bold, even to the point of one final, massive, attack over which **He will be victorious and from which He will emerge, resurrected, to govern heaven and earth within us.**

On the night that Jesus was born “there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.” (Luke 2:8). Though at first fearful **they rejoiced to hear the “good news of great joy” which the angels declared to them.**



We, too, rightly rejoice at all the possibilities that the Lord's birth in us holds for us. Yes, it sets in motion a spiritual journey which will have its bumpy, challenging and sometimes discouraging times. But at the end of this journey **the Lord will be raised on high within us - resurrected**, blessing us with peace, such as the world cannot give us (John 4:27); **His love and His wisdom influencing everything**; influencing our every thought, our every desire, every word we speak and all that we do.

Amen



Readings:

Isaiah 61:1-3

Luke 2:1-16



Arcana Caelestia 9405:2

“The only subject in the internal sense of the Word is **the Lord, and His kingdom and Church**. This is what accounts for the holiness of the Word, and also for the Lord’s Coming to, and presence with, those who, as they read the Word, have in mind the Lord and the neighbour - the neighbour being the good of one’s fellow citizens, one’s country, the Church and heaven - and not themselves. The Lord comes to them and is present with them because they **allow themselves to be raised by the Lord into the light of heaven**, unlike others who do not allow themselves to be so raised because they have their minds firmly fixed on self and the world.”

And,

“Apocalypse Explained” 365:42

“Peace is with those people who are in the conjunction of good and truth from the Lord.”



THE END

