



52 STEPS

through the mountain peaks
of the Bible story

Part 32 ► Immanuel, God With Us

"When the fullness of time had come"

So, after many centuries, "when the fullness of time had come" (Galatians 4:4), the long awaited Messiah is born. **"The Word became flesh and dwelt among us"** (John 1:14). That Greek word translated "dwelt" is literally "tent", or "tabernacled". God once lived on Earth in the Old Testament Tabernacle; now He lives on Earth in the Person of His Son.

Our story begins in the Temple in Jerusalem in the days of the Roman Emperor, Caesar Augustus (Luke 1:5-25,57-80). The angel Gabriel tells a priest named Zechariah that his wife Elizabeth will bear him a son. He's to call him John; he'll be God's messenger to prepare the way for the Messiah's ministry. Elizabeth is barren and, besides, both she and Zechariah are old. But John the Baptist is born and, in time, he withdraws to the desert until his public ministry begins.

Meanwhile, a few months after his announcement to Zechariah, God sends Gabriel to a virgin called Mary, who's betrothed to a man called Joseph. She lives in Nazareth, a town in Galilee, in what is now northern Israel. Gabriel tells her she'll bear a baby boy. He'll be conceived, not by marital union, but by the Holy Spirit. Gabriel explains, **"The Holy Spirit will come upon you, . . . therefore the child . . . will be called holy—the Son of God."** (Luke 1:35). She's to call Him Jesus—a Hebrew name meaning 'Yahweh saves' (Yahweh being God's personal name). He'll sit on the throne of His father David, and reign over the nation of Israel for ever (Luke 1:32-33).

An angel also appears in a dream to Joseph. He assures him that Mary's pregnancy is from the Holy Spirit, and says **". . . you shall call his name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins"** (Matthew 1:21).

Mary is indeed **"highly favoured"** among women (Luke 1:28 NIV). Yet her life—and Joseph's—have been turned upside down. In that Jewish society, to be pregnant while betrothed is evidence of adultery. The scorn from those who didn't believe her pregnancy was a miracle must

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God once lived on Earth in the Tabernacle; now He lives on Earth in the Person of His Son.

have hurt her for years. But in Mary, God finds a woman of faith—a woman to whom He can safely entrust these unparalleled joys and sorrows. Her trusting and obedient response to God's words through Gabriel echoes down the ages: *"let it be to me according to your word"* (Luke 1:38).

So Mary is *"found to be with child from the Holy Spirit"* (Matthew 1:18). The Son of God begins human life, conceived in a virgin's womb. This is more momentous than even the creation of the Universe. He's called *"Immanuel"*, meaning 'God with us' (Matthew 1:23, Isaiah 7:14). The birth of a mother's first baby is a life-changing event. The birth of *this* baby would change the whole world.

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Born into our broken world

At that time, the Roman Emperor had ordered a census. So Joseph and Mary travel to Bethlehem—a few miles south of Jerusalem—to be registered. They go there because Bethlehem was the home town of Joseph's ancestor, the great King David.

In Bethlehem, Mary gives birth. The Son of God is born as a helpless baby, needing to be cuddled and fed and changed just like any other baby. How amazing! Mary lays Him *"in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn"* (Luke 2:7). That word *"inn"* can also be translated *"guest room"*. It seems that Joseph and Mary were staying with relatives; perhaps their guest room was occupied, or too small for the birth. And so Jesus was most likely born in the family room, with space to one side to bring in the family's animals at night (thus the manger). So He's probably born in the midst of a family home—just the kind of place you'd expect the One who is *"God with us"* to be born!



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We might have expected the Son of God to come to Earth as a great philosopher or nobleman, living in one of the great cities of the world. But He didn't. He was born, it seems, in a humble home. He lived most

of His life in obscurity, in a nondescript little town in a troubled corner of the Roman Empire.

Out in the fields nearby, shepherds are guarding their sheep. The stillness of the night is broken by an angel announcing, "unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:11). Suddenly, "a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel", praising God (2:13 NIV). The shepherds hurry to Bethlehem and find the baby Jesus. Some of their lambs may have been destined for sacrifice in the Temple. But now they see the Lamb of God.

That word "host" in Luke 2:13 can also be translated "army". Recall what we read in Genesis 3:15: a single offspring of Eve will one day defeat Satan. That offspring, of course, is Jesus. Now He's been born! Satan will soon be defeated! No wonder God's angelic army rejoice!

A few weeks later, Mary and Joseph go up to Jerusalem to offer the sacrifice for Mary's purification and to present Jesus to the Lord (Luke 2:22-39, see Leviticus 12:1-8, Numbers 18:15-16). Whilst in the Temple, faithful Simeon blesses Jesus and prophesies about Him; and aged prophetess Anna "began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem".

Wise men from the east

Months later, wise men journey from an eastern land to worship Jesus (Matthew 2:1-12). They've seen a star that showed them a king of the Jews has been born, and they come to pay him homage. They go first to Jerusalem—that's where the local king, Herod, lives. They enquire where the new king has been born. Herod is alarmed; so is "all Jerusalem". He gathers the Jewish leaders and they tell him that the Messiah will be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2). So he summons the wise men, and tells them to find the child, so he, too, can go and worship Him. The star leads them to Jesus; they give Him precious gifts—gold, frankincense and myrrh—and worship Him. The coming of these men from the east foreshadows the day when God begins to call people from *all* nations to worship Jesus.

But Herod has lied. He wants to know where Jesus is, so he can kill Him, fearing He might claim his throne. He slaughters all the infant boys in Bethlehem and all that region. Through this murderous king, Satan tries to destroy Jesus. But an angel has forewarned Joseph in a dream. He and his family escape to Egypt, and Jesus is safe.

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The coming of the wise men from an eastern land foreshadows the day when God begins to call people from all nations to worship Jesus.

"Out of Egypt I called my son"

After Herod's death, the family returns and settles in Nazareth. This fulfils what Hosea prophesied, "Out of Egypt I called my son" (Matthew 2:15, Hosea 11:1). Just as God rescued His "firstborn son" Israel from Egypt (Exodus 4:22), now He brings His "one and only Son" (1 John 4:9 NIV) out of Egypt. Jesus is the perfect Israelite; He's the True Israel.

Jesus grows through childhood and adolescence and on into adulthood just as we do, but without sin. He plays and learns; He explores and marvels at the creation He Himself has made.

Fully God and fully man

Jesus was conceived “from the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 1:18). Mary was His biological mother. And Mary, of course, was a direct biological descendant of our forefather Adam. In fact, Jesus’s genealogy in Luke 3:23-38 is probably His biological ancestry through Mary, and it goes all the way back to Adam. So Jesus is related to you and to me, and to every person who has ever lived. It is vital that He should be. Only then could He be our Saviour.

But Jesus was conceived when Mary was a virgin. He had no human father; God is His Father. And so, though He was born as a true member of our human race, He was without sin.

Jesus was fully human in every sense of the word—except without sin. For our sake, He “made himself nothing” (Philippians 2:7) by taking the humble position of a servant—a person without rights or privileges^[1]. He was an Israelite; he followed Hebrew customs, and He taught like a first-century Jewish rabbi (a Jewish scholar and teacher). Like us, He was subject to temptation, hunger and thirst, weariness and pain. He went through the whole sweep of human experience, from the ordinary daily routine to the worst horrors of humiliation, torture and death.^[2] And Jesus’s perfect human nature, far from protecting Him from sorrow, made Him uniquely sensitive to it. He felt, more keenly than we can know, the pain, suffering, and injustice that everywhere confronted Him.^[3]

Jesus is *fully God*; He’s the second person of the Holy Trinity. And He’s *fully human*, too. Before His conception, He had one nature—a divine nature. But at His conception, he gained a human nature as well. So our incarnate Lord is a *single* Person with *two* natures—a human nature and a divine nature. So, for example, even when he was a newborn infant lying in His mother’s arms He was—at the very same time—continuing to sustain the entire Universe (see Colossians 1:17, Hebrews 1:3)!

Next time

We look at the four different gospels, biographies of Jesus written by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. We explore why Jesus came to Earth. And we tell the story of his baptism and temptation, which open the way for His public ministry.

Bible Reading and Question

You may like to read Isaiah 7:14, Matthew 1:18-23, Luke 1:26-37. Here’s something to think about:

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Why is it so vital for our salvation that Mary was a virgin when Jesus was conceived?

REFERENCES ► [1] See Paul’s Letter to the Philippians (New International Commentary on the New Testament) by Gordon D. Fee, page 213. Published by William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, in 1995. [2] See *Creed or Chaos* by Dorothy L. Sayers, page 4. Published by Harcourt, Brace and Company, New York, in 1949, page 4. Available online at <https://archive.org/details/dlernet.73136/page/11/mode/2up> (accessed 30 January 2025). [3] See *Did Christ Have a Fallen Human Nature* by Donald MacLeod, page 8. In *Reformation Today*, number 80, July-August 1984. Available at https://www.reformation-today.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/RT_080.pdf (accessed 30 January 2025).

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