

What a Surprise! (Pt. 1) Matthew 1:18; Luke 1:30-35

When we read the gospel accounts of the birth of Jesus, we are introduced to one surprise after another, each of which is saturated with spiritual significance. God did that on purpose. He orchestrated a series of events and circumstances that defied logic *and* the laws of nature, and He did so, at least in part (I believe), so that we would be compelled to either say, “That’s ridiculous! God would *never* do that.” Or “That’s amazing! Only *God* could think of that and only God could *do* that!”

The humble parents from a backwater village called Nazareth; the census mandated by a pagan ruler which took them to Bethlehem, the city of David; the no vacancy inn; the crude stable and the feeding trough where baby Jesus was laid; the star in the Eastern sky; the visits from lowly shepherds and Gentile dignitaries—none of whom were thought to be on God’s list of VIP’s.

The whole story is so incredible, so beyond the realm of human reasoning, that we would never have imagined God’s story unfolding in this way—even with all the clues He gave us.

The Old Testament is laced with dozens of prophecies that predicted a Messiah who would emancipate God’s people and establish His kingdom on earth. Many first-century Jews were serious students of these prophecies and eagerly anticipated their fulfillment. Messiah was the subject of their prayers, the topic of their conversations, the object of their hopes and dreams.

And their expectations of what this Messiah would be like, what He would do, and how His kingdom would look were very specific, based largely on their oral traditions and commentaries. They were expecting a Messiah who would come on the scene in regal fashion. He would arrive in such a manner that His credentials would be indisputably validated, and His identity would be undeniably affirmed, particularly by the religious experts. Everything about His life—His birth, His education, His social status, His political connections, His relationships to the existing institutions—would be recognized by all *and* accepted by all.

It’s not hard to imagine, then, that all the features surrounding the birth of Jesus I described earlier took them by complete surprise. Jesus was born in obscurity and poverty. Jesus was welcomed into this world by a handful of low-lifers and some disinterested barn animals.

But most astonishing of all is how this baby named Jesus came to be. Matthew begins his gospel account by listing the human ancestors of Jesus, beginning with Abraham, proceeding fourteen generations to David, another fourteen from David to Josiah, the last king of Judah before the Babylonian captivity, and yet another fourteen from Josiah to Jesus. Those seventeen verses are intended to establish the legitimate credentials of the Messiah, for He was prophesied to come from the lineage of King David.

So far, no surprises. But then in verse 18 Matthew drops a bombshell. *“This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit.”*

“With child through the Holy Spirit.” This fact is stated so matter-of-factly that a casual reader might get the sense that it happens all the time. But, of course, it doesn’t. It had never happened before, and it won’t happen again. Mary, a virgin, is *pregnant* by the Holy Spirit! This is, by far, the most astonishing part of the Christmas story.

More detail is given in Luke’s Gospel. In chapter 1 we are told about her visit by the angel Gabriel who said to her, *“Don’t be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give Him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David, and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, His kingdom will never end.”*

Mary asked, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?”

The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God” (1:30-35).

The Son of God. A Being *not* conceived by the union of male and female, but a Being conceived by the Holy Spirit so that He would be, literally, *God’s* Son—a Person with both a divine nature and a human nature. Fully God and fully man.

And what is most amazing is that this Being that was implanted in the womb of a virgin, and which grew from an infinitesimal seed into a fetus and nine months later emerged into this world as a helpless infant, was not a created being. He wasn’t something or Someone *new*. This was the *eternal* Son of God who changed His form.

The Gospel of John begins this way: *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word*

was God...Through Him all things were made; without Him nothing was made that has been made. In Him was life, and that life was the light of men...And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have beheld His glory, the glory of the One and only, who came from the Father full of grace and truth" (1:1,3-4,14).

John wants us to know that Jesus is the complete and exhaustive revelation of God—the one, true God. He is not *a* god, He is *the* God. He *is* the God who always was, the God who created the universe, and the God who is the Source and Giver of life. But this God chose to temporarily lay aside many of His divine prerogatives and change His form, becoming one of us.

Astonishing! And not what *anyone* expected!

You know why? Because nobody fully comprehended what this Messiah would do. What we, as human beings, *needed* Him to do was much more than what any of us had in mind.

Matthew tells us what that is in **verses 20-21**. *"...An angel of the Lord appeared to [Joseph] in a dream and said, 'Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give Him the name Jesus, because He will save His people from their sins'" (Matthew 1:20-21).*

The Jews expected Messiah to be great and powerful, but they understood His role to be purely political. He would overthrow the Roman government and install a new world order. Yes, there would be religious components in it—God's law would be enforced, the Temple would have greater prominence, it would be a true theocracy—but it would be much like King David's reign, only more glorious, more influential, and more enduring.

But God had something more in mind... something much more. He sent His Son into this world to become a man *in order to save His people from their sins*. He came to deliver us from a tyranny far greater and more powerful and dangerous than Rome or any earthly kingdom.

You see, ever since Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden this world has been under a horrible curse. It has been under the dominion of Satan. According to Scripture, He is the prince of this world (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11); He has jurisdiction over it; He controls the minds of unbelievers and blinds them with His lies. But that's not very difficult for Him to do because He is controlling people who have hearts that are already deceitful and selfish and sinful people who cannot help *but* sin.

Oh, we can be polite, and we can learn how to behave in a socially acceptable manner, but when push comes to shove, we are selfish. Our default mode is self-protection and self-promotion.

But the real tragedy is how this sinful nature compels us to relate to God in our natural state. We don't naturally want to have anything to do with Him. We view Him as our adversary. We view Him as an intruder, a threat to our freedom. We try to tame Him or manage Him by refashioning Him in our own image. We ignore Him, defy Him, oppose Him, and reject Him. This is the state of the creatures that God created for His own pleasure and glory.

Into that world Jesus came. He left the splendor and glory of heaven—a place in which there is absolute peace and righteousness and joy. And He came to a world controlled by sin and Satan—a world saturated and dominated by the very things that are the opposite of who He is.

God became flesh and lived among us in order to save us from our sin. This was God's method of rescuing us from our lost and sinful condition and restoring us to a place of intimacy with himself.

Jesus, born in a stable and laid in a manger; who grew up in a remote corner of Palestine; who, at age thirty, was baptized by John and began to teach and preach the Kingdom of God; who made the lame to walk, the blind to see, the sick to be well; who cured those who had diseases; who cast out demons, and even raised the dead; who walked on water, who commanded the wind and the waves and they obeyed Him; who performed miracle after miracle, wonder after wonder to demonstrate that He was Messiah, Son of the living God.

But He didn't come just to live a good life or even to show us what God looks like. He came to *do* something—something only God could do, and something only a man could do. Thus, the God-Man. He came to be the sacrifice for our sins. He came to die for us. He came to be our Substitute.

And that's exactly what happened when Jesus hung on a cross. He, the sinless Son of God, bore the sins of the world in His body. All the sins of humanity—from the tiniest white lie to the most horrendous murder—invaded His being so that, in the words of the Apostle Paul, "He became sin for us" (2 Cor. 5:21).

And then God His Father did something. He deliberately kindled His anger—an anger that had been stored up since the very first sin and which had intensified with every successive sin. And all of that pent-up rage He funneled onto the body of His Son, so that Jesus became the object of His wrath.

Jesus bore our sin and experienced our punishment so that God's justice could be satisfied, and we wouldn't

have to be punished; so that we could become God's friends, so that we could be forgiven, so that we could have eternal life. That's why God became flesh and lived among us. Jesus came to die.

And He did it because there is not a person alive who is able to secure his/her own salvation. We needed someone to pay the penalty for our sin that we could never pay, someone to experience the punishment we deserve so that we wouldn't have to. God became a man because we were helpless to save ourselves.

I realize that most of you have read and heard the story of Jesus' birth so many times that it's probably lost its surprise element. But try your best to let it hit you afresh, and let it astonish you as God intended it to astonish you. You will never truly appreciate Christmas, you will never truly appreciate God, you will never truly appreciate life itself unless you grasp something of what it meant for the eternal God of the universe to become a little baby who would grow up to be the Savior of the world. And not just the Savior of the world, but *your* personal Savior.

Activate the Awesomeness Christmas 2023 (Part 2)

In these next few minutes, I'm going to try to convince you that your response to the Person who was born in that Bethlehem stable and laid in a manger two thousand years ago is *the* most important and most consequential thing about you. And since it is the most important, consequential thing about you, I'm going to try to convince you to respond to him *today*, so that you can enjoy the benefits of a relationship with this Person from this day forward.

Now I know what you're thinking. This sounds like some slick, simplistic, far-fetched sales pitch that's way too good to be true.

I opened a letter not long ago that had three statements in bold letters—statements that were intended to show how special and privileged I was to be part of what appeared to be a rather exclusive and elite club. In the upper right-hand corner were the words, "WE'RE THRILLED YOU'RE WITH US!" These were followed by a question in bigger and bolder letters in the middle of the page, "ARE YOU AS EXCITED AS WE ARE?"

And then, the climax, in even bigger letters, at the bottom of the page: "ACTIVATE THE AWESOMENESS!"

Can you guess *who* was behind these superlative-laced statements? I assure you this was not an acceptance letter from a prestigious university, or a welcome letter from a political action group. This was an invitation from a credit card company to open an account! And while I know this is extreme—I know this is taking hype to a new level of deception, I cannot help but think that this mass produced piece of mail is a parable of our times.

Here's what I mean: We live in a culture that has mastered the art of making the mundane seem sensational. So much so that we have learned to become suspicious of and cynical about anything that sounds too good to be true.

I got a phone call from someone with a foreign accent who informed me that I had just won \$5,000. I immediately hung up without saying a word. Because I've learned not to trust people who say to me, "I've got an offer for you that you cannot refuse! I've got something to give you that will totally change your life!"

So, I think I understand why some of you might be leery and even a bit put-off when I say that your response to Jesus is the most important and consequential thing about you. How does a two-thousand-year-old story possibly have relevance to real life circumstances like the challenge of raising a family in the 21st century, the rising cost of living, strained relationships, addictive behavior, guilt, loneliness, emptiness, and fear?

It's because the angels declared that this story is "*good news of great joy which shall be for all people*" (Luke 2:10). That includes *you*. This story has the answers to the questions you've been asking about the ultimate issues of life. This story has the solutions to your greatest problems. Because the answers and solutions you are looking for are found in *Jesus*. That baby who was lying in a manger, who lived thirty-three years on this planet, who died on a cross for your sins, who rose from the dead and is now exalted in heaven at the Father's right hand, is God's provision for your ultimate needs.

He's God's provision for the guilt and shame you experience because of your sin and wrongdoing, because he bore your sins in His body on the cross and paid the price for your guilt and shame, satisfying God's justice and enabling you to be forgiven by God and declared righteous in His sight.

Jesus is God's provision for your craving for unconditional love and friendship because He's proven by His life and death that there's nothing he wouldn't do for you. Jesus said, "*Greater love has no one than this, that He lay down His life for His friends*" (John 15:13). And John, one of His disciples, said, "*This is love: Not that we loved God but that He loved us and gave His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins*" (1 John 4:9). He did this so we could be God's friends and enjoy His unconditional love for all eternity.

Jesus is God's provision for your fear of death because Jesus defeated the powers of sin and Satan on the cross, and then dealt a fatal blow to our ultimate enemy, death, when He rose from the dead. Jesus has been victorious! Jesus has been crowned the King of kings and Lord of lords, and Jesus will one day return to establish His kingdom of righteousness on this earth, where sin and sorrow will be eradicated, and where He will reign in unrivaled splendor and majesty. Jesus offers real hope—a hope that includes eternal life for those who believe in Him.

Jesus is God's provision for your brokenness. He can restore the mess that either you or someone else has made of your life, for He is an expert in taking broken pieces and not just putting them back together but making them into something that is better and stronger and more beautiful than it was before. His compassion and His grace and His loving kindness are a salve for the deepest wounds.

Jesus is God's provision for you to be set free from bondage to the things that keep tripping you up and causing you fall flat on your face. For when you put your trust in Him, not only does He liberate you from the paralyzing, enslaving dominion of sin, but He gives you a new operating system, the Holy Spirit, who enables you to walk in the light as He is in the light.

Jesus is God's provision for you to live as He created you to live—in peace and freedom and joy...great joy. Not the artificial Christmas cheer that fades after the season is over, but a deep, abiding joy that comes from knowing Him and from being in a deep, intimate relationship with Him.

And He can do these things for you because of what happened two thousand years ago, and because of where Jesus is today, at God the Father's right hand, where He has been given all authority and all power and all dominion, both now and forever more.

The only question is: Have you received Him? The story is not complete until you do. Receiving Him simply means you believe that He is who He said He was, Messiah, Son of the living God. That He died on the cross for your sins and then rose from the dead three days later. It means that you trust Him to forgive your sins and make you righteous and acceptable in the sight of God. And it means that you let Him sit in the driver's seat of your life.

Receive Him. He's the Son of God! Put your trust in Him. He died for your sins! Praise Him. He rose from the dead and now sits at the right hand of His Father in heaven. Embrace Him. He loves you with an everlasting, unconditional love!

That is something to celebrate!

I'm going to steal something from that credit card company (because, heaven knows, they've stolen enough from me over the years). I'm going to steal that phrase, "Activate the Awesomeness."

Just as that credit card won't work until the person for whom it is offered activates it, so a personal relationship with God does not exist until the person to whom it is offered activates it. And it is activated by *faith*. By believing that Jesus is God's provision for your salvation, your forgiveness of sins, your peace with Him, and your eternal life.

If you haven't activated the awesomeness yet I would like to invite you to do so today. You'll never experience life as He intended, you'll never know the joy and peace that He wants you to have until you do.