

1 IMMANUEL, GOD WITH US

*God became man. Nothing in fiction is so fantastic as this
truth of the incarnation.*

—J.I. Packer

There are some things, the Bible writers remind us, that are simply worth taking a long and careful look at. And the birth of Jesus Christ is certainly one of them.

Not surprisingly, then, the New Testament opens with more than *ten occurrences* of the command to ‘Behold’ as the story of Christ’s birth is narrated. We are called to consider the uniqueness, the majesty, the very miracle of this pivotal event of all history: ‘*Behold*, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel (which means, God with us)’ (Matt. 1:23).

Look! Listen! Consider the marvelous realities that attended the coming of the Christ. Behold.

BEHOLD

The Prophesied Coming of Christ

We are called to notice, first of all, how purposeful the coming of Christ was. Mark opens his gospel by telling us that it is not actually *his* gospel: it is the gospel of Jesus Christ. Mark writes,

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, ‘*Behold*, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way, the voice of one crying in the wilderness: “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight”’ (Mark 1:1-3).

This prophecy is speaking specifically of John the Baptist who would come as a precursor to the Messiah, preaching repentance and pointing others to him. But ultimately the prophecy is drawing attention—not to the messenger, not to the precursor, but—to the event itself. Our focus is drawn to the one whom the messenger is heralding, whom the emissary is ushering in. And this herald for the Messiah was prophesied 700 years beforehand by Isaiah, as Mark reminds us.

In fact, Isaiah was not alone in foretelling this forerunner to the Messiah. Malachi also purposefully pointed us to him, saying, ‘*Behold*, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, *behold*, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts’ (Mal. 3:1).

This is just a sampling of the many reminders from Scripture that the coming of the Christ was planned. It was foretold. It was purposed long beforehand. In fact, it was purposed by the Christ Himself. Did you notice who is speaking in

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the first person through Malachi's prophecy? 'I will send *my* messenger, and he will prepare the way before *me*.' This is God Himself saying, in effect, 'I myself will prepare a messenger to go before me when I, the Lord, come to you—and it will be something to behold.'

Jesus is not the great jack-in-the-box of history, springing up suddenly—maybe even unpleasantly—out of nowhere as an utterly unexpected prophet or teacher or miracle man. Jesus' birth was planned before the world began! It was prophesied hundreds of years beforehand, and on multiple occasions, because God knew that humans would sin; and He knew that we would need a Savior.

Jesus Christ is God's plan to save sinners. There is just one plan. Just one. We as humans may have a plan A, plan B, etc. for any particular endeavor. But God just has one plan to save humanity. Jesus Himself says, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me' (John 14:6). Jesus is God's plan to save fallen and frail humans.

We find this foretold event, this advent, again emphasized in Matthew, as Joseph is mulling over how to respond to his pregnant fiancée Mary.

But as he considered these things, *behold*, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, 'Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: '*Behold*, the virgin

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shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel' (which means, God with us)' (Matt. 1:20-23).

All this was done, Matthew emphasizes, in order to fulfill what the Lord had already spoken through His prophets. 'Watch for this, because I am going to give you a sign. It is not something that happens every day. A virgin will bear a child!'

Not only the coming of Christ, but the miraculous manner of His birth was specifically foretold so that we might take all the more notice of it when it came to pass.

The Miraculous Coming of Christ

Matthew tells us specifically to 'Behold' an angel's appearance, a virgin giving birth, wise men from afar coming to see the child who is Christ, a star that led them to Him, and most of all Immanuel—'God with us.' The coming of Jesus as the Christ is a miracle, accompanied by an army of miracles, and Matthew wants to draw our attention to how significant, how truly amazing, this event is.

A VIRGIN GIVES BIRTH

It may seem as you are reading through the Bible that there is a miracle happening every few days. In the Old Testament alone there seems at times to be astonishing things happening one after another. A whole nation walks through a sea on dry ground, then is fed by bread from heaven, then is drinking water out of a rock. In another book of the Bible a man is interpreting dreams and telling the future, then some people are walking out of a fiery furnace unscathed, then another

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man is being cast into a lions' den but actually exits the den unharmed.

While it may seem like these miracles are constantly occurring in the Bible, the fact is the Bible is telling us about some of the most remarkable events and people and truths in history, and so it is necessarily skipping over centuries of normal days—totally normal days. The Bible skims over the stories of millions of faithful people, children of God, who served God in obscurity their whole lives without a single miracle happening to deliver them or their children from difficulty or pain. They did not watch their enemies get crushed by an angel or by a big wave in the sea. No, the vast majority of saints throughout history—Old Testament and New Testament—have lived their whole lives, faithful to God, without experiencing a single angel appearance or hearing any audible voice from heaven.

In other words, it was just as unexpected for Zachariah or for Joseph or for Mary to find an angel standing in front of them and speaking to them as it would be for any of us. It would be like an angel suddenly appearing to you on a Monday morning in your kitchen, addressing you audibly as you are about to sit down to breakfast. This is not normal for anybody. That is why we are told, '*Behold!* An angel appeared to Joseph.' This is way out of the ordinary. Joseph did not have this happen to him all the time. This was a jaw-dropping, history-shaping event. Something very special is happening here. Something supernatural is intervening in the natural world.

BEHOLD

In Luke 1:31 an angel appears to Mary also saying, ‘And *behold*, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.’ Mary was just as taken off guard, just as astonished by this event as anyone else would be. When the angel tells her she is going to have a baby, she asks the obvious question: ‘How will this be, since I am a virgin?’ (Luke 1:34). This just does not happen! Mary is basically asking, ‘Gabriel, has someone not explained the birds and the bees to you?’ To which Gabriel replies in effect, ‘Why do you think I’m here? And why do you think I said, “Behold”? This is extraordinary!’

Gabriel explains further, ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; *therefore* [you’re right, this doesn’t happen every day, in fact only one day in all of history!] the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God’ (Luke 1:35). The Son of God! ‘This is amazing,’ the angel might as well be saying to Mary, ‘I’ve been around for thousands of years, I sang out loud and I shouted for joy when I saw God creating the earth; but even I have never seen anything like this before. I have never seen anything as wonderful, as unthinkable, as God coming to earth and taking on humanity. *Behold*, Mary, this is something that the Holy Ghost Himself is going to be bringing to pass inside you.’

WISE MEN FOLLOW A STAR

Matthew goes on to draw our attention to the wise men who visited Jesus after He was born: ‘Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, *behold*, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem’ (Matt. 2:1).