

CHAPTER TEN

- 1 THE ANGEL GABRIEL**
- 2 THE MESSIAH**
- 3 AMONG THE SAGES**
- 4 THE PROPHET JOHN**

1 THE ANGEL GABRIEL

For centuries, Satan had held man in a death grip. Man had struggled along under a mountainous burden of sin, with only one hope on the horizon—a PROMISED DELIVERER. It was true that God in his mercy had allowed an innocent animal to die in man's place—as a substitute, but that was only a temporary payment for sin. In the full scope of eternity, the blood of animals could not remove sin—it only covered it for a time. The Scriptures make it clear that...

...it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

Hebrews 10:4 NASB

Was there an answer? Well, perhaps one man might be willing to die for another, but that wasn't a solution either. One sinner could not save another sinner.

It would be like two men who had fallen into an old mine shaft. Struggling around in the darkness and quagmire at the bottom of the pit, the one said to the other, "Get me out of this appalling place; I am sinking in this foul slime." The other man replied, "Are you insane? I'm drowning too! I can't help you." In the same way, it is impossible for one sinner to pull another sinner out of the abyss of sin.

But surely, there had to be one who could help. However, in looking over the face of the globe, no sinless man could be found. Whether prophet or priest, every man from the beginning of time had been born as a *son of Adam*, born with Adam's sin nature, born with the awful stench of sin permeating his life. No man could function as a DELIVERER simply because every man had his own sin penalty to contend with.

Man needed a SAVIOR from outside the pit, one who was sinless, one who had no sin-debt, one who would be able to save all humanity from the horrible mire of sin. But there were questions. Who would the DELIVERER be? Where would God find such a sinless person? Would God assign the job to an angel or prophet? It seemed people weren't sure. How would God make it clear just who THE ANOINTED ONE was? When he arrived, how would one know?

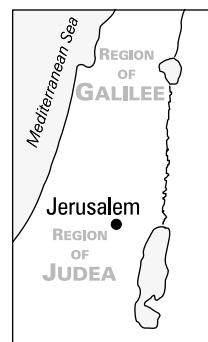
To begin with, God was going to prepare the world by sending a special messenger to announce the impending event. One can't help but wonder if the angels were in deep discussion over who this select bearer of good tidings might be. *Would it be one of them?* But then news of a different kind leaked through—news having to do with the identity of THE DELIVERER. It must have left all of heaven gasping.

THE PROPHET ZECHARIAH

In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, ... his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well along in years.

Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.

Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord... Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, ... to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."



Luke 1:5-17

The angel Gabriel had told Zechariah that his son, John, would be the messenger sent to prepare the way for the coming of

the Lord. That was news alright, but it was that last tidbit of information that had heaven all astir.

Four hundred years before his time, the prophet Malachi had written about this event.



"See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the LORD Almighty.

Malachi 3:1

There it was in plain words. Zechariah must have wondered why he had not seen it before. It was obvious! The LORD Almighty had said, *"I will send a messenger to prepare the way before ME!"* Moreover, the angel had said that the messenger who would prepare his way would be Zechariah's own son—John.

ELIZABETH

Zechariah went home dumbfounded. And God kept his word; it happened just as the angel said it would.

After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. "The Lord has done this for me," she said. "In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people."

Luke 1:24,25

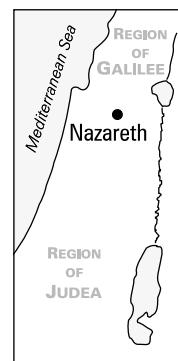
But a question must have nagged away at the back of Zechariah's mind. Just how would the Lord Almighty come to earth? Would he come in a golden chariot driving seven white steeds, surrounded with legions of angels all dressed in brilliant light? Would he unseat the Roman rulers—dump Herod off his throne? The angel had not said.

MARY

The scene now shifts. The angel made another visit, this time to a young lady named Mary.

In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary.

Luke 1:26,27



Joseph and Mary were engaged to each other according to the traditional eastern customs. The Scripture says that both Joseph and Mary were direct descendants of King David who had lived 1000 years earlier.

The angel went to her and said, “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.”

Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, “Do not 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.”

Luke 1:28-31

What!? Now it was Mary's turn to be speechless. When Mary finally found her tongue, she asked a very logical question.

“How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “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.”

Luke 1:34,35

Mary was to be the mother of THE DELIVERER—the one promised to Abraham and his descendants down through the ages!

It all made sense now. Mary knew the stories well. Way back in the Garden of Eden, God had promised Eve that THE PROMISED DELIVERER would be *her offspring*. It did not say *their offspring*, referring to both man and woman. Now the promise was about to be fulfilled, and the child would be born of a virgin—it would be *her offspring only*. *The baby would not have a human father.* What had seemed to be an insignificant choice of phrasing now carried tremendous weight.

But this little notation in the footsteps of history had greater ramifications. Because the Baby would not be conceived by the seed of the man, the Baby would not be part of Adam's bloodline. All descendants of Adam had inherited his nature—*the sin nature*.¹ But Jesus would not be a *son of Adam*. Rather, he was the **Son of God*. He would have the *nature* of the God Most High. No wonder the angel referred to the

*see pages 178 to 180 for an explanation of the term, “Son of God.”

Baby as *the Holy One*. The child would be sinless, just as God is sinless. Jesus would be perfect from conception.

So, the Lord Almighty would *not* be coming with all of heaven's pomp and grandeur. Rather, he would arrive on the planet as all mankind had and ever will—as a baby! The angel Gabriel said to Mary...

"Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God."

"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. *"May it be to me as you have said."* Then the angel left her. *Luke 1:36-38*

Mary knew Elizabeth was too old to have a child. Surely if it was possible for Elizabeth to conceive, then it was just as believable for a virgin to give birth. Mary chose to trust God.

THE PROPHET JOHN

When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. *Luke 1:57*

John was born just as God had promised. The Scripture says it was quite an occasion, and well it should have been, for a stigma was attached to those who could not bear children. Zechariah was so thrilled he burst into a speech, a benediction of praise to God. What he had to say was really a mini-tour of the world's history, punctuated with the repeated promises God had given over the centuries—the promise to send a DELIVERER. You can see the elderly Zechariah holding the child high, fixing his eyes on baby John's face as he said:

"And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him..." *Luke 1:76*

John would be the messenger who would announce the arrival of THE PROMISED DELIVERER to the world.

THE MEANING OF A NAME

The Scripture records many instances of prophets who lived long before the birth of Jesus, who wrote with unerring accuracy about his coming. Isaiah recorded this 700 years before the birth of Jesus ...



*For to us a **child** is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, **Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.***

Isaiah 9:6

Notice that the *child* is called *Mighty God, Everlasting Father*—two names that can mean nothing else but *God*.

As we have seen before, God has many names, each describing something of his character. We find an interesting contrast between two names used of Jesus.

1. The Son of God: Some have understood the term *Son of God* to mean that God had sexual relations with Mary. Such a thought is not only erroneous, it's blasphemous. The Word of God *does not* teach such a concept anywhere. Indeed, it says the opposite. The Scripture clearly tells us that Mary was a virgin until *after* Jesus was born. Jesus was conceived, not through physical union, but by a miracle. God empowered Mary's body to do that which is not natural—to give birth to a baby while still a virgin.

So, if the term does not have physical implications, what does it mean?

Most languages use the term *son* in ways that do not confine it to a physical descendant. For example, if a person is referred to as a *son of the road*, it is understood that the individual is a *traveler*. (Roads do not give birth to children!) In the same way, Scripture uses this idiomatic form of language to make a point about a person's **character**. Consider these examples:

❖ *Joseph... who was also called Barnabas... (which translated means Son of Encouragement)* *Acts 4:36 NASB*

We understand by this that Joseph's life was distinguished by the encouragement he gave to others, not that his father's name was "Encouragement."

❖ ... *the sons of disobedience.*

Ephesians 5:6 NASB

Obviously, this does not mean that a fellow called *Disobedience* had several sons. Instead, it is referring to those, who by nature, are disobedient.

❖ ... *you son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness...*

Acts 13:10

Clearly, Satan did not take a wife and have a son! The passage is referring to a *wicked person*.

So when the Scripture talks about Jesus as the *Son of God*, we need to understand that it refers to his character. He had a perfect, holy nature—the nature of God, in contrast to a mere human who has a corrupt nature—thus expected of a *Son of Adam*.

The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being...

Hebrews 1:3 NASB

2. The Son of Man: This term does not imply that Jesus had a human father. (Joseph was Mary's husband but not Jesus' father.) Jesus only ever used the term, *Son of Man*, in reference to himself. It has two aspects:

a. It declares his humanity: Although Jesus did not have a human father, he did take on human form. He lived as a human lived, yet without sin. We will see the importance of this as we progress in the story.

b. It declares his true identity: For centuries, scholars of the Holy Scriptures recognized this term as referring to THE ANOINTED ONE. Jesus quoted these prophets, pointing out that he fulfilled their references to THE PROMISED DELIVERER. Consider what the prophet Daniel wrote more than 500 years before Jesus' birth.



I saw in the night visions, and, behold, one like the Son of man came... And there was given him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages, should serve him.

Daniel 7:13,14 KJV

As we progress through the Scripture, we will understand the implications of this term to a greater degree.

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NAMES COMBINED

The two terms, *Son of God* and *Son of Man*, are only two of many names used of Jesus. When brought together, they find their expression in the fact that...

God was manifest in the flesh...

1 Timothy 3:16 KJV

God did not cease to be God when he became man. Nor did he become sinful when he took on the form of a man. Though he accepted certain self-imposed limitations, he was still all-powerful, still all-knowing, still perfect in righteousness. How he could restrict himself to a human body and still be complete in all his attributes, is hard for us to understand, but this is what the Scripture teaches. **God is great and can do anything but contradict himself.** God inspired his prophets to write about his appearance on earth in human form. How could he not then fulfill it? As we go on in the story, it will make sense as to why God chose to do things this way.

A FINAL CLARIFICATION

Just as some have misunderstood the term *Son of God* to mean that God had a child by a woman, so others have concluded that since Mary was the mother of Jesus, this meant that Mary was God's mother. This, of course, implies that Mary was some sort of God. Some have believed that Mary is the Queen of heaven, whom God married resulting in the birth of Jesus. Once again, the Scripture would consider this concept blasphemous to the extreme. *Nowhere is this taught in the Word of God.* The Scripture is very clear. Mary was a woman who loved God and honored his Word—but she was a mere human. She was not a God, nor the mother of God. Yes, she was the vehicle God used to enter the world, but only that and nothing more. Mary herself was a sinner and recognized the need of a DELIVERER—the need for a Savior.

Mary said: "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior..."

Luke 1:46,47

2 THE MESSIAH

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. Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

Matthew 1:18,19

According to the customs of that day, to break the engagement a divorce was required. Imagine for a moment how Joseph felt. He must have been in anguish. Mary was pregnant and the child wasn't his. To reveal the truth publicly would label Mary for what she must be, an adulteress, unless Mary's preposterous explanation about an angel appearing to her was right. (*No, that was absurd. The poor girl must be losing her mind. Joseph loved her, but he could not marry a girl who had cheated on him and was obviously trying to cover it up with an insane story.*) What Joseph thought about it all we don't really know, but we do know that he painfully decided to quietly divorce her.

But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him 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."



All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel"—which means, "God with us."

Matthew 1:20-23

Joseph could not have heard it any more plainly. Mary was still a virgin, and she was going to have a child! The child's name would be *Jesus*, which means *Deliverer* or *Savior*. He would *deliver* or *save* people from the consequences of their sin. The angel said that another of Jesus' names would be *Immanuel*, meaning *God with us*. Jesus would be God living in human flesh among men.

The prophet Isaiah had written about this event 700 years before.

 *Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.*

Isaiah 7:14

Joseph must have bolted upright in bed. So Isaiah had been right! It was happening just as God said it would. But what would everyone think? No matter! There was only one thing to do—he would believe God and do what he said.

When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. Matthew 1:24,25

THE BIRTH

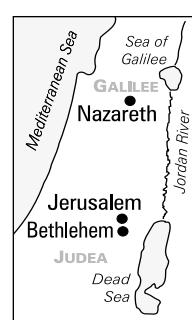
In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world.

Luke 2:1

Caesar needed money, and if the Romans got an accurate census, more people would have to pay taxes. It's doubtful that Joseph was happy. His wife was almost due. Being a carpenter by trade, he'd probably been working on a crib and had arranged with the local midwife for a clean, safe place for the baby's delivery. Now he was required to take his wife to Bethlehem which a thousand years before had been King David's ancestral home. A seventy mile (120 km) trip with a wife who might give birth any day was not a welcome thought when you had to travel by donkey or on foot. Why did the Romans have to come up with this idea now? Why not take the census in Joseph's home town, Nazareth? This was very awkward. But the Romans weren't giving people any choice. He would have to take Mary to Bethlehem.

And everyone went to his own town to register.

So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in



cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

Luke 2:3-7

So Jesus was born in Bethlehem, far from Joseph and Mary's home. The town was so crowded that the only place where they could find lodging was in a stable. Jesus' first crib was a manger, a trough for feeding cattle. As Joseph looked at his wife, it must have seemed like his careful plans had all gone wrong. *Bethlehem!* Of all places! And in a musty stable! But as he looked at the child, he must also have sensed that everything was right. Perfectly right.

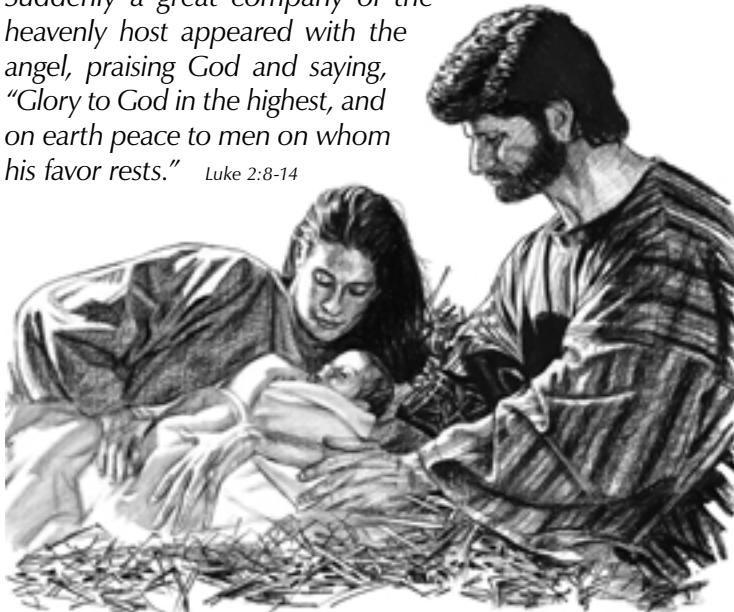
*And he gave him the name **Jesus**.*

Matthew 1:25

THE SHEPHERDS

*And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a **Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.** This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."*

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests." *Luke 2:8-14*



The shepherds had been minding their own business, tending their sheep as they always had. Often sheep from their flocks were used in the temple sacrifices in Jerusalem only a few miles north of Bethlehem. Life continued as usual. But now the angels had come, and their whole world was askew. The shepherds must have excitedly queried each other, "Did you hear what I heard? The Christ is the Lord!"

CHRIST / MESSIAH

The Greek word *Christ* is the same as the Hebrew word *Messiah*. The word means, *the anointed one*. For centuries, the name *Messiah* had been applied to THE PROMISED DELIVERER.

Now the angels were saying that THE ANOINTED ONE—the Messiah/Christ—was the Lord.² The term *Lord*, in and of itself, was used by the ancient prophets to refer to the Messiah. The angels had announced to the shepherds that ...

... a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.

Luke 2:11

In essence, God was having the angels announce on his behalf ...

Is it not I, the LORD?

And there is no other God besides Me, A righteous God and a Savior; There is none except Me. Isaiah 45:21 NASB

It is important to understand that this is the one and same God, otherwise you have confusion. You can begin to think there are two Gods, perhaps a little one and a big one. But the Scripture says ...

"I, even I, am the LORD, and there is no savior besides Me."

Isaiah 43:11 NASB

There is, and only ever has been, one Savior.

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child ... Luke 2:15-17

The shepherds were poor men, not the sort of folks that one would normally expect to be invited to the birth of a King. But there were others on their way to see Jesus.

WISE MEN

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him."

Matthew 2:1,2

The Magi were experts in the study of the stars, coming from Arabia or further east, perhaps Persia (present-day Iran). They were obviously men who were sensitive to what God was doing in the world as they, at great personal expense, had traveled a great distance over treacherous mountains and deserts to see the newborn child. Such men could be expected to visit a king. The king enthroned in Judea at this time was Herod the Great who, no doubt, had been alerted to this rather prestigious company. They could hardly have escaped the notice of the sentries guarding Judea's borders. Their visit could not have been perceived as a threat as they were not leading armies. All they had was a question: "Where's the newborn King?"

When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.

Matthew 2:3

That single question really rocked Herod. He held his authority as king in a tightly clenched fist, and he would crush anyone who dared try to wrench it from him. No doubt the whole city was a little shaken as well. Herod was known to be cruel to his citizens, especially when he was upset. Who knew what he might do. Herod called his religious advisors.

When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born.

Matthew 2:4

One can imagine the religious leaders being a little perplexed. Since when had Herod shown interest in religion? Nor were they expecting questions about the Messiah. It seems clear that although the Magi were aware of the momentous event

occurring on the earth, it had escaped the notice of the Jewish leaders. But Herod was not a man to be ignored. He had asked a question, "Where was the Christ to be born?"

THE PROPHECY

You can see an agitated scribe blowing dust off a small scroll. His fellow sages bend over the papyrus and with rheumy eyes scan the text. They are a little rattled. They want Herod to understand that *they* are not the ones who had said these things. A prophet by the name of Micah had written it over 700 years earlier. A shaky finger points to a well-worn part of the document. Herod disdains to look. A scribe clears his raspy throat and reads:



"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are 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 are from of old, from everlasting."

Micah 5:2 NKJV

The prophecy was very specific. It said the baby must be born in Bethlehem *Ephrathah*. Since there were two towns called Bethlehem, one near Nazareth and another south of Jerusalem in the region of Ephrathah, the distinction was important.

Had Joseph been aware of this information it would have explained the real cause for their trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem. It was God's plan! He merely used the Roman census to get them there.

Herod wanted to see if the Prophet Micah had recorded more. He had! It clearly said that the One to be born had lived from everlasting. Herod must have been ashen. It couldn't be. Only God was eternal. Perhaps the scribes were intentionally trying to alarm him, to manipulate him. It wouldn't hurt to humor them. He would show them what sort of worship new kings could expect. He shooed out his priests ...

Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh.³

Matthew 2:7-11

God continued to guide these men.

And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him."

So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod.

Matthew 2:12-15

Consistent with what secular history records of him, Herod did make an all-out effort to kill Jesus, but the child remained safe in Egypt. In the ancient stories, a cloud hung over Egypt. It was remembered as a place of oppression and violence. It came under God's judgment. But now something different happened. God chose Egypt to be remembered with honor as the place to which he led Mary and Joseph to find refuge for Christ. Egypt became the place of safety for the special family, whereas cruelty, injustice and plans to thwart God's purposes now resided with Herod in the Land of the Jews. The story was reversed.

Eventually Herod died and Joseph, Mary and Jesus moved back to Nazareth where Joseph worked as a carpenter.

And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him.

Luke 2:40

THE WORD

Which is the better communicator—a letter or the person who wrote the letter? Letters have their place, but if you really want to get to *know* someone, nothing compares with spending time together and dialoging with that person face to face. We have seen that over the centuries, God honored those who believed his spoken and written Word. But God didn't stop at *telling* us about himself, he went a step further. He *showed* himself to us by coming to earth.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. ... The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us...

John 1:1,2,14

What was this Word that *was with God in the beginning* which *became flesh*? The Scripture tells us that the Word was none other than Jesus Christ. The eternal Word took the name Jesus (meaning *Savior*) only after he was born on earth as a man.

Now when it says, Jesus was *with God*, this does not mean that there were two Gods. Look at it this way. When we speak, we don't think of our words as being separate from ourselves. One can't open the brain and cut out the section entitled "WORDS". Words are spoken or written thoughts, and in some mysterious way, we are one with our words. If someone criticizes what I say or write, they are criticizing me, not the letters on the page or the syllables in the air. Whatever my word accomplishes, whether pleasing or provoking, those words will be completely identified with me. I am the one who will be blamed or blessed for them. My words and I are one. Similarly, Jesus and God are one. Jesus is *The Word of God*.

Unsurprisingly, God, the Ultimate Communicator, used the best method of communication.

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us...

John 1:14

3 AMONG THE SAGES

It must have been quite an experience for Joseph and Mary to raise the child Jesus. He was sinless. Perfect. Even as a youngster, he never became impatient, never talked back or threw a temper tantrum. Though stories exist speculating about Jesus' years growing up in Nazareth, none of them find their source in the Scripture. Only one account was recorded, that when Jesus was twelve years of age.

Every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover. When he was twelve years old, they went up to the Feast, according to the custom.

Luke 2:41,42

According to Jewish culture, at puberty a boy became a *full member of the religious community. As such, he had all the privileges and responsibilities accorded to a young man. As Joseph and Mary took the customary trip to Jerusalem, Jesus' *coming of age* could not have been far from their minds.⁴

*A boy became a son of the covenant, a custom continued in the present bar mitzvah ceremony.

GOING HOME

With the feast over, everyone headed home. Though we don't know all the details of the trip, we can imagine how the events unfolded. Probably the folks from Nazareth all traveled together for company and mutual safety. Because the children walked slower, they, along with the women and some of the men, left early in the morning to get a head start. The rest of the men would have stayed behind for last-minute visiting and then would have headed out to catch up with the rest of the group at dusk.

After the Feast was over, while his parents were returning home, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but they were unaware of it. Thinking he was in their company, they traveled on for a day.

Luke 2:43,44

You can picture Mary leaving at sunrise. Jesus was nowhere in sight, but she wasn't alarmed. Jesus was at the age when he was expected to be a man. He would be hanging back with the others as they visited in the temple complex. No doubt he was with Joseph. At the very thought Mary smiled

with satisfaction. And what a wonderful young man he was! She was glad he could take the extra time to listen to the wise men in the temple.

Dusk fell as Joseph arrived at the prearranged spot along with the other men. They'd had a good day too, filled with learning. They had spent extra time listening to the scholarly men of the temple teach God's Word; then they had discussed the teaching en route as they hurried to catch up with the women. His only regret was that Jesus hadn't remained with him. After all, he was at the age when he was expected to shoulder the responsibilities of a young man. He could have learned so much. But obviously he had gone on ahead with Mary and the rest of the children. He must remind Jesus that he was growing up. It wasn't often that he had to do that. Come to think of it, he couldn't remember ever reminding Jesus about anything. Then Joseph spotted Mary. Both were all smiles:

"Did you have a good day?"

"Yeah, great!"

"Did Jesus enjoy himself?"

"Jesus?"

The smiles disappeared. "I thought ...!"

"Yes, but I thought ..."

Then they began looking for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they went back to Jerusalem to look for him.

Luke 2:44,45

THE SEARCH

The search must have been frantic. They searched all the places a normal boy might be found. The sweets section of the market was thoroughly checked and local construction sites were turned inside out to see if he had lingered to watch. In desperation Joseph retraced his footsteps. The last he had seen of Jesus was in the temple.

After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers.

Luke 2:46,47

Jesus was right where he was supposed to be, doing what both Joseph and Mary had wished him to do. There was only one difference. Instead of being instructed by the temple wise men, Jesus was doing the teaching. No, he wasn't delivering a lecture—but the penetrating questions, the profoundness of his own understanding, the depth of his answers, did not go unnoticed. Indeed, the temple sages were hanging on to every word. The Scripture says the learned men were *amazed!*

The learned men weren't the only ones speechless. Joseph and Mary were flabbergasted and, no doubt, much relieved. They found their tongues quick enough.

When his parents saw him, they were astonished. His mother said to him, "Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you." Luke 2:48

Jesus asked them a question.

"Why were you searching for me?" he asked. "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" Luke 2:49

A GENTLE REMINDER

This wasn't a sassy retort. Jesus was simply saying that he was right where a child should be—at home in his Father's house. *But what did he mean by Father? Who was this Father he was referring to?* We will study this more in the next section. For now, all you need to know is that Jesus used this phrase as a gentle reminder to his earthly parents of who he really was.

But they did not understand what he was saying to them. Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. But his mother treasured all these things in her heart. And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men. Luke 2:50-52

4 THE PROPHET JOHN

Jesus did not officially begin his life's work until he was about thirty years of age. By then, John, the son of Zechariah, had started to prepare the way for him.

In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of

heaven is near." This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah:

 *"A voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'"*

...People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan.

Matthew 3:1-3,5

The Prophet John was fulfilling an ancient prophecy made 700 years earlier by the Prophet Isaiah. He was preparing the way for the Lord. In the same passage, Isaiah had said....

 *You who bring good tidings to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, "Here is your God!"*

Isaiah 40:9

John was telling everyone that would listen that THE ANOINTED ONE had arrived. It created quite a stir.

BAPTISM

John was being referred to as the Baptist because he was baptizing people. The ritual of baptism was not uncommon to the Middle Eastern people of that day. It was full of meaning. Today, however, much confusion surrounds this word.

Baptism implies *identification*. A common meaning of the word *baptizo* originated in the early Greek textile industry. In the process of dyeing fabric, a piece of cloth was plunged into a vat of dye, whereby it took on the color of the pigment. The cloth was totally identified with the dye.

John taught that the Jews had strayed from the Scripture, embracing man's ideas. He said they needed to *change their mind* about their wandering ways and return to God; in short, repent. The Jews who were baptized showed that they identified (or agreed personally) with his message of repentance.

People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance."

Matthew 3:5-8

REPENTANCE

John the Baptist saw that some in his audience were Pharisees and Sadducees. Remember, they were the ones who *added to* or *took away from* God's Word. These two sects did not have much use for each other, but they had one thing in common—they both thought they were a *cut above* the ordinary. They were proud. John called them a *bunch of snakes* because they enforced unbearably strict rules on others, but did not practice what they preached. He told them to repent, to have a change of mind.

JESUS' IDENTIFICATION

Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. But John tried to deter him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" Matthew 3:13,14

John was a prophet but he recognized that Jesus was more than a prophet. Jesus did not need to repent of anything because he was perfect. John requested that Jesus baptize *him* for repentance of sins for John knew that *he* was the one who needed to be baptized, not Jesus.

Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." Then John consented. Matthew 3:15

Jesus insisted on being baptized because he wanted to be identified with John's message of righteous living. He wanted to affirm John's message as being true.

As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." Matthew 3:16,17

In a moment, we will look at this verse in more depth, but first, let's finish the story.

THE LAMB OF GOD

The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is the one I meant when I said, 'A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.'"

John 1:29,30

John identified Jesus as THE PROMISED SAVIOR, the one who would take away the sin of the world. He said that Jesus had lived before him—eternally. John said ...

"I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God."

John 1:34

On one occasion, I was teaching a young couple through the Scripture. Upon reading this verse, *"Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"*, the lady came alive! In an excited, animated voice she said, *"The Lamb, the Lamb! Does ... does this have anything to do with all the lambs we have been reading about in the old part of the Bible!?"*

I told her, "Yes, it does ... and when the time comes, it will all fit together in a way that will make incredible sense."

TWO KINDS OF GREATNESS

Some folks say, *"Impossible! Almighty God would never stoop so low as to be born as a helpless baby ... in a dirty stable. He would never become a man! God is too great for that!"*

But, is that really true? Perhaps we need to redefine the word *great*. Consider this:

1. There is the *greatness* of a king who lives in his imperial palace, surrounded by wealth and luxury and slaves to keep him comfortable. Rarely does he get his hands dirty. He knows little of the hardships and concerns faced by his subjects day after wearying day.
2. Then there is the *greatness* of the skilled doctor who forsakes a lucrative medical practice in his homeland to set up a clinic in a foreign land. Surrounded by disease and poverty, he serves the people of the land, helping them, healing them, and, finally, laying down his life for them.

Which kind of *greatness* do you think is most worthy of a merciful and gracious God?

DOES GOD TALK TO HIMSELF?

Beginning in the first pages of the Holy Scripture, we noticed an unusual way that God speaks, as if he was talking to himself. For example, when he created man ...

*God said, "Let **Us** make man in **Our** image, according to **Our** likeness ..."*

Genesis 1:26 NKJV

When Adam sinned, we find God in conversation ...

*And the LORD God said, "The man has now become like one of **Us**, knowing good and evil."*

Genesis 3:22

When God dispersed the people of Babel, he said ...

*"Come, let **Us** go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other." So the LORD scattered them ..."*

Genesis 11:7,8

Who is God talking to? Who are the *Us* and *Our*?

When the angel talked to Mary, he said ...

"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."

Luke 1:34,35

Here we see the *Holy Spirit*, the *Most High*, and the *Son of God* all mentioned in one verse. We know that the *Most High* is God. We have already read many verses that say Jesus is God come in human flesh. Are they one and the same? What about the *Holy Spirit*? What does the Scripture say? We come now to the verse we just read:

As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

Matthew 3:16,17

We have three entities here: *Jesus*, the *Spirit of God* and a *voice from heaven*. Confusing? It can be if you don't understand some basic scriptural concepts. Here are some more pieces to the puzzle.

Continued next page

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First of all, we know that there is only one God. That is emphasized repeatedly in the Scripture.

Jesus answered him ... "Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God is one Lord."

Mark 12:29 KJV

That is reasonably straightforward. However, there are things about God that are beyond our scope of reason; incredible complexities that are difficult for us to fathom. For example, the whole concept of an *eternal* God is not easy to digest. In the same vein, trying to conceptualize a God who is *everywhere at the same time* is totally baffling. Getting a solid handle on just these two truths is impossible for our finite minds. Now we are faced with a revelation about God that is equally difficult to grasp, yet nonetheless clearly taught in the Word of God. The Scripture reveals to us a God, that is *at the same time* Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—three eternal and co-equal persons that comprise the being of God. These three persons form a *tri-unity* or *trinity*, but comprise the one and only God.

Over the years, various attempts have been made to explain the Trinity:

1. The egg: Each egg has a shell, a white and a yolk; three distinct parts, but only one egg.
2. Dimensions: A box has height, width and length; though not the same, they cannot be separated.
3. Multiplication: $1 \times 1 \times 1 = 1$
4. The Sun: Consists of a visible heavenly body, invisible light, and warming heat—three distinct elements, yet one sun.

Although some of these illustrations may be helpful, they still fall short of giving us a full understanding. We need to be careful that we don't try to drag God down to our level and view him as one like ourselves. God says part of the reason we don't understand him is because ...

You thought that I was just like you ...

Psalm 50:21 NASB

As children, there were many things we didn't understand and yet we accepted them at face value. *"What is electricity? Why doesn't it run out onto the floor when I pull the plug out of the socket? I can't see it. What do you mean it will hurt me if I stick tweezers in the outlet?"* Just because we failed to understand electricity didn't make it any less real.

As adults, we are somewhat smug in our ability to comprehend the world about us. Over the centuries, things that puzzled the ancients have become commonplace to our understanding. Yet, we need to be humble. Much of the known universe still contains great mysteries. People living 100 years from now may look back on us as being blind to what they will consider obvious. The time may come when the concept of a *trinity* will make perfect sense.

Even if that day does come, we need to recognize that our limited ability to reason cannot fit an infinite God into our finite minds. Rightly understood, God, as revealed in the Scripture, is a God who leaves us astonished.

Think for a moment: an eternal God; all-knowing, everywhere present at the same time; Creator of the whole universe; *a Trinity, one, yet comprised of three persons—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—who are all equal in character and ability.* Unfathomable! Though these concepts may be hard to grasp, the Scripture says they are all true.

The very word *God* is a statement about the Trinity. The Hebrew language has *singular* (one), *dual* (two only) and *plural* (three or more) noun forms. The word *God*, in Hebrew *Elohim*, is grammatically plural, allowing for three, but has a singular meaning.

The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever ...

Deuteronomy 29:29 NKJV