

CHRISTMAS WITH DR. LUKE BY

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INTRODUCTION

Dr. Luke is our primary source of information about the birth of Christ. Without his research and his Gospel we would know very little about the family and the background of our Lord. In this series of fifteen chapters we will explore the subjects that Dr. Luke calls to our attention. Some of them may seem

trivial, but when it comes to the greatest story ever told, nothing is too small to consider as a valid subject for study. Each chapter is independent of the others. If you have an interest in a particular topic you can go directly to that chapter.

Thanks to Dr Luke, you will see that the Christmas message is one that covers a lot of territory, and is filled with human interest topics. My hope is that by reading these chapters you will come to treasure more than ever what God did for us on that first Christmas.

CHAPTER ONE

1. AN ATMOSPHERE OF AMAZEMENT based on Luke 2:8-20

Human beings love to be amazed and filled with wonder. That is why they travel the world over to see the 7 wonders of the world and the million and more lesser wonders of God and man. That is why the constant craving for special effects in spectacular movies that take us out of dullsville into a world of wonder.

The amazing is always popular. Back near the turn of the century, Hodji Ali made his fortune by being amazing. In full view of the audience he would swallow peach pits, pennies, rhinestone rings, watermelon seeds and a whole series of small objects. Then he would bring up specific items at the request of the audience. Like the great fish in the book of Jonah, he could vomit for a profit {prophet}.

That was merely a warm up. While his assistant set up a miniature castle, Ali drank a gallon of water and then a pint of kerosene. The drum would begin to roll and he would spit out the kerosene in a six foot arc across the stage, setting the castle on fire. Then with the flames shooting high into the air, he would spit up the water and extinguish the blaze. The people loved it, for it was amazing, and people love to be amazed.

That is what the Christmas season is all about. It is about being amazed. The whole world, in shopping centers, is changed to convey a sense of amazement. The lights and decorations and colors are all changed to convey a sense of wonder. We are expected to respond, how wonderful, how beautiful, how amazing it all is! The world and the church cooperate once a year in an all out effort to create an atmosphere of amazement.

It is very Biblical to do so, for that is the spirit that characterized the first Christmas. After the shepherds had gone through the wonder-filled experience of hearing the angels and seeing the Christ-child for themselves, they spread the word, and we read in verse 18, "And all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them."

Amazement has three different levels very much like the three levels of heaven. There is the atmospheric heaven of the birds and the clouds. There is the astronomical heaven of sun, moon and stars. There is the angelic heaven of all the heavenly hosts and the Trinity. Human amazement begins on the highest level as the shepherds are confronted by the

wonder of the angels. But then the shepherds have to go back to tending their sheep, and day by day the wonder of it all would begin to fade. The challenge for them and for us is to keep the wonder alive and on the highest level. Let's look at the three stages of amazement, for just being aware of them will help us.

I. THE RESPONSE OF AMAZEMENT.

This is the first and highest level where we are confronted by the mysterious and marvelous and feel a sense of awe. Georgia Adams conveys a common experience of amazement in her poem Evening Awe.

**I am filled with awesome wonder
on moonlit, starlit nights;
Speechlessly I stand engrossed in
Such an array of sights.**

**Like a rich black velvet curtain
The sky hangs silently-
Studded with millions of diamonds
Shining so brilliantly.**

**Among the myriads of stars
Flung into outer space,
The dipper so majestically
Appears to take its place.**

**Each whirling, twirling planet spins
Within its orbit there;
The silvery moon hangs deftly
Suspended in mid-air!**

**Ah yes, the spacious firmament
In silent witness stands
To prove God holds this universe
Within His sovereign hands!**

-Georgia B. Adams

We have all been amazed at some time by gazing up into the sky. The wise men were more amazed than usual when they saw the Star of Bethlehem. In that state of wonder they were willing to give up a good chunk of their life to follow that star to the Christ-child. When they arrived they no doubt had the emotions of those who sing, "I stand amazed in the presence of Jesus the Nazarene."

We see an atmosphere of amazement everywhere in the New Testament when people confronted Jesus. When Mary and Joseph found Jesus as a young boy in the temple talking with the scholars, they were amazed. When Jesus began to teach, the people were amazed at His authority. When He began to cast out evil spirits, they were amazed at His power. When He healed people, they were amazed and they praised God. When He stilled the storm His disciples were completely amazed. The point is, there was an atmosphere of amazement that surrounded Jesus and His ministry, and we read in Mark 9:15, "As soon as all the people saw Jesus, they were overwhelmed with wonder and ran to greet Him." The response

of amazement was the normal response of men when they had an encounter with Christ. The next level we want to consider is-

II. THE RETREAT OF AMAZEMENT.

This second stage is a lower level and is the inevitable direction we must go. Just as Jesus did not permit Peter to build his three tabernacles on the Mt. of Transfiguration, and stay in that elevated atmosphere of amazement, so He does not permit anyone to go through life in perpetual wonder. The disciples were often amazed at Jesus, but after living with Him for some time, they went from being, sometimes awe-filled, to being sometimes, awful. They fought and bickered over issues of pride, and lost the sense of honor it was just to be in His presence.

Judas retreated so far from the glory of his first response that he lost the light altogether. But nobody escapes the detour off the super highway of amazement. That is just the way God made us. The thing that amazes me is how fast we can retreat from the atmosphere of amazement. Some years back, my parents visited us and we took them down town to see the sights. It was new to all of us as we saw the flowing water and trees, and all sorts of plants inside a modern building. It was truly amazing. But years later when we returned to hopefully again be amazed, the novelty was gone. It was a boring journey for the atmosphere of amazement had vanished. I experienced the retreat of amazement.

Amazement thrives on surprise and the unexpected. It has a hard time surviving in an atmosphere where all is known. I enjoyed the amazing surprises of the movie, Raiders Of The Lost Ark. But when I watched the film again on television, I was no longer surprised by the unknown, and I lost a great deal of amazement.

Earl Stanley Gardner tells of the fascinating experience of a traffic officer who was patrolling the highway one hot summer day. He found a place in the shade to pull over and observe the traffic highway one hot summer day. He found a place in the shade to pull over and observe the traffic. He saw a car which was acting strange, as a driver drove slowly along a creek road leading to the highway. He got his binoculars out, and to his surprise, he recognized the driver as his next door neighbor. He observed him stop the car, and get a bag out of the trunk, and lay it in the shade by the stream. He then got back into the car and left.

The officer was curious, and drove to the spot, and checked it out. He discovered a mother cat and six kittens. He quickly picked them up and drove with his siren blaring at high speed to his neighbors house. He ran around the back of the house and put the cats on his porch. He never told his neighbor what had happened, but delighted in hearing him tell others of the impossible story of how his cat and six kittens beat him home, when he drove off to abandon them. His neighbor lived in perpetual amazement at finding these cats purring in the sunlight on his back porch. The point is, had the officer told him what had happened, the amazement would retreat rapidly into oblivion. It was kept alive by the mystery of the unknown

Children are amazed at the commonplace because to them it is the unknown. They love it for they enjoy wonder. A little boy was asked when his birthday was and he said he didn't know. When he was asked why he didn't ask his parents he said, "because I want it to be a surprise." Children long to be surprised and amazed, and it is a mistake to tell them they are silly. You can bring about the eclipse of wonder and the retreat of amazement by forcing a child to move to rapidly out of the world of play and fantasy into the world of work and reality. The retreat of amazement is sure enough without provoking it prematurely.

We need to recognize the reality of the retreat of amazement, so we can work at

counteracting it. Christmas and communion have this in common—they are events which we repeat so often that they can lose their sense of wonder. They focus on the two great events of our faith—the birth and the death of Jesus. They are the beginning and the end of Him who is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. Because there is a retreat of amazement at these events of wonder, we need to look at the third stage—

III. THE RENEWAL OF AMAZEMENT.

The key to wonder is to recognize that we only know in part, and we see through a glass darkly. There is so much more to the familiar than what we know. We lose our sense of wonder because we think there is nothing new. The childlike mind says there is always something new. When I read Dr. Paul Brand's book, *In His Image*, I realized how little I knew about the wonders of the human body, and the fantastic intricate mechanism by which we live and breathe and have our being. We take it for granted, but there are few things in this universe more filled with wonder than this body we live in. After reading that book, I recognized just how true an insight St. Augustine had, when he wrote, "People travel to wonder at the height of mountains, at the huge waves of the sea, at the long courses of the rivers, at the vast compass of the ocean, at the circular motion of the stars; and they pass by themselves without wondering."

The value of having children around at Christmas time is that they help you keep wonder alive. We need, not only the Christ-child in the center of Christmas, but we need other children around the circumference of Christmas, for without childlike wonder you lose a lot of what Christmas is all about. Kenneth Wilson wrote, "Take the wonder out of Christmas, and you take a star not only out of the skies but out of eyes. Take away the soft edges of wonder, and you wind up only with hard questions. Take away the angels, and you have to start looking for the angles. Whatever else Christmas is, it is wonder's response to something bigger than life. Sometimes—and Christmas is one of the best times—the secret is not explain, explain, but enjoy, enjoy."

That is what it means to be childlike. The shepherds were adults, but they came in childlike wonder to behold the baby in a manger. The wise men were adults, but they came in childlike wonder to bow before the Christ-child. I see three ways to get on the road that leads to a renewal of amazement.

1. Research—both shepherds and wise men said let's go see. If you set out to see more and never be content with what you know, you can renew your sense of wonder.
2. Retelling—like the shepherds, share the message of Christmas with others. Just to get a child to see the wonder of it all will rekindle your own childlike amazement.
- 3 Remembering—the reason Jesus said to do this in remembrance of me is because He knew the rejuvenating power of memory. We have all found old pictures that brought back the emotions of the past. The past is never over, for by remembering it you can relive it in the present.

The wonder of Christmas is that God would send His Son into the world as a infant. We say you don't send a boy to do a man's job, but God did, and the wonder of it is that the boy got the job done. He did what all of history failed to do. He reconciled God and man. Gambling men would have put their money on Herod or Caesar, and big armies, and big budgets to solve the world's problems with evil. But God used a baby to win this war of the ages.

In Alex Haley's book, *Roots*, there is a scene where the slave Kunta Kinte drives his master to the big plantation house. He parked the buggy, and settled down to wait. He heard the music of the white folks as they danced, but then he heard other music coming

from the slave quarters. He got out of the buggy and went to the cabin, and there he found a man playing African music. He remembered hearing this music as a child. The man had come from his section of Africa, and they talked of home and the past. That night when he got back to his cabin, he laid on the floor and wept, for he almost forgot who he was and where he was from. The music had rekindled his memory, and he was restored to an attitude of amazement concerning his roots. So, when we come to Christmas, we are to look back and remember what God did for us through this baby he sent into the world. We are to remember that it was by means of this child that we gained the right to become children of God. We are to make Christmas a time of the year when we enter into an atmosphere of amazement.

CHAPTER TWO

2. THE ANGELIC ANTHEM based on Luke 2:8-14

Louis Pasteur, the French chemist, was the first to suspect that man's major enemies were invisible. He advanced the theory that all disease is caused by microscopic organisms called germs. His theory was challenged because some diseases like rabies produced no germs. He concluded that these particular germs were just too small to be seen by the microscopes of that day. In other words, he was saying some invisible things are more invisible than others.

Thirty years later the Dutch botanist, Martinus Beijerinck, filtered out all the germs from a diseased tobacco plant's juices, and yet the juice still produced the disease in a healthy plant. He called this disease-causing liquid a virus, from the Latin word for poison. This term eventually came to designate these smaller than germs trouble makers.

In 1931, bacteriologist determined that these viruses were smaller than the smallest cells. They are so small they are on the borderline between something and nothing. Yet these invisible realities have become one of the biggest issues of modern times. Science, the media, the medical world and the masses all believe in the reality of these invisible creatures. You would have a hard time finding a person who is skeptical about the reality of the virus. Yet we live in an age where millions are skeptical about the reality of angels.

The small and invisible are acceptable, but the big and invisible are too much to swallow for the doubter. It is too great a paradox to be large and still not be detectable to the senses of man. It makes sense to be hidden in minuteness, but to be hidden in hugeness is illogical. And so, the non-believer writes off the whole world of the supernatural, which includes God and His angels. Modern man is not necessarily happy with this choice, however. Norman Gary in one of his novels says, "you got rid of God and isn't it funny, something is still missing."

There are many Christians who also feel uneasy about angels. They have a strange malady of angelophobia-the fear of angels. They are embarrassed by angels. But Christmas forces angels on us, and there is no escape from them. They are in stores, on cards, on trees, on TV, in songs, and most of all, in God's revelation of the Christmas story. Amidst this awesome avalanche of angels we are forced to acknowledge them, and somehow assimilate them into our world view. We want to look at the angels and the Christmas story, and see just how relevant they are to the Christmas story, and thus to God's plan of salvation. The first thing we want to focus on is-

I. THE ANGELS APPEARANCE.

Verse 9 says, an angel of the Lord appeared to them. You can find a lot of places where an angel of the Lord appears in the Bible, but you will have a hard time finding a text where the angel of the Lord is joined by a great company of the heavenly host. Angels usually operate alone. They are messengers, and like human messengers they are loners. The messengers of ancient history were usually runners who ran alone, and not in a group. The pony express did not send out a group of riders, but each covered his territory alone. When God sent His messengers from heaven, one was a great plenty to get the job done. But here on the first Christmas we see a very unusual event. The angel of the Lord is not left to sing a solo, but is backed up by the greatest angelic choir that ever appeared on earth.

John heard this choir in heaven where they were praising God on their own turf. But never had anyone ever heard this angelic choir on earth. Heaven's music is breaking through the barrier between time and eternity, and men on earth are hearing heaven's sound. The only other record of their performing was at creation. There were no humans in existence to hear them at that time. So their singing at Christmas is a once in a history exclusive performance.

If some great singing group stopped their tour bus on a country road to sing for a few cow-hands in the field, that event would make big news. Famous singing groups just don't do such things. But here is the greatest singing group in all the universe making their first earthly appearance, not at Herod's castle, not in the temple, not in Rome, but in a field outside tiny Bethlehem. Their audience was not the dignitaries of the nation, but a handful of lowly shepherds.

The real wonder is that they appeared at all. The fact that they did makes it clear that from God's point of view the birth of His Son was the greatest event in human history. This angelic anthem was a guarantee that this would be the most celebrated birthday the world had ever seen. Their presence is just another factor in making this a one of a kind event. Jesus was a one of a kind baby, born to a one of a kind mother, for a one of a kind plan of salvation. It is fitting that the angels would at His birth make a one of a kind appearance.

Some say the angels are not relevant. They remind me of Whately who wrote about what he heard at the Grand Canyon, "Turning away from the sun set serenade of gorgeous colors bouncing off the Grand Canyon, a young woman said disdainfully to her companion, it just isn't relevant." Whately had to agree that from a strictly survival point of view the sun set and the Grand Canyon are not relevant. Violets and Orchids and most of the beauty of creation are not relevant to survival. But man does not live by bread alone. There is more to life than food and clothing and money in the bank if that is what you mean by relevant.

Man has more than a body to feed. He has a mind and a soul, and he needs a diet that nourishes the whole man. He needs mystery for the mind, and wonder for the soul, and this is where the angels become relevant. Their presence in Christmas guarantees that it will never lose its wonder, for they add the supernatural touch. There is not much about Christmas that is wondrous if you just look at the earthly scene. Stables are not known for their aesthetic value. The whole scene is very commonplace and earthly. If it was not for the appearance of the angels, the only sign of heavenly involvement in this story would be the star. They were the only living supernatural beings involved in the story. They keep it in the realm of wonder.

One of my granddaughters favorite songs is Twinkle Twinkle Little Star. Some day she will be able to sing the more scientific version-

Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star

**I don't wonder what you are.
What you are I know quite well
And your component parts can tell.**

That loss of wonder will never happen with angels, because we can never analyze angels adequately. They will be, until eternity, a source of mystery and wonder. That is their role in God's plan. They keep Christmas a day of mystery and wonder forever. There was a good reason why God chose this event for the greatest angelic choir ever. Albert Einstein once remarked that, " the most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder, and stand wrapped in awe, is as good as dead: His eyes are closed." The appearance of the angels in the Christmas story assure us that there will always be wonder connected with this awesome event.

Dr. Luke tells us there were a multitude of the heavenly host. This was one of his favorite words. He used it 23 times. All other New Testament writers only used it 7 times altogether. He is making it clear that this was no trio or even a sextet- this was a great multitude of angels. He was trying to make an impression here. It was his style. He wants us to get a sense of the staggering involvement of heaven in this earthly event.

**Angels and archangels gathered there
Cherubim and Seraphim thronged the air.**

This never happened before, and will not likely ever happen again on earth. This was the greatest angelic appearance of all time. And because it is so, it helps to make Christmas the greatest time of wonder and celebration. Next, lets look at -

II. THE ANGEL'S ADORATION.

The song of the angels sets the tone for all others who come on the stage of the Christmas drama. The angels adore Christ, and so we see the shepherds also adore Christ, and so do the wise men. To adore is to worship with intense devotion. Adoration is the key ingredient in the atmosphere of Christmas. The angels add wonder, but they also lead the way in worship as well. There is no need to wonder about what Jesus most wants for His birthday. There is no gift we can give better than what the angels gave that first Christmas-adoration.

**We may not have treasures of glory or gold,
Or perfumes to pour at His feet,
But, oh, if we knew of the worth of the Christ,
We would give Him our homage complete!**

**Our cherished desires we would open anew
And yield Him our hearts and our all;
As incense we'd offer our praises to Him,
Adoring, before Him would fall!**

**The Savior is worthy of all we can give,
Whatever our coffers may hold;
Oh, may we then pour out our treasures to Him
And worship as they did of old!**

These angels do not even need salvation, for they are not lost, yet they are praising God for His gift as if they were part of the redeemed. This tells us a lot about how angels feel

about man. Unlike the unseen virus which only has an interest in man's destruction, these unseen beings care about man and his salvation. They are not jealous that God has given His very best for man. They do not have envy, and fight the plan of God to populate heaven with these fallen beings. Instead, they sing as never before, with pure adoration of the love of God.

Angels are our friends, and they are on the side of light against darkness. We are not alone in this universe. There are a vast host of intelligent un-fallen beings who care about our salvation, and lead the way in praising God for providing us with a Savior. If you want the true Christmas spirit, then listen to the angels. The very essence of Christmas is adoration. We do not know what Christmas is until we feel the need to praise God. To sing glory to God in the highest with the angels is where it is at. This means we need to have received God's gift, and taken His Son as our Savior. Only those who have done so can know the true spirit of adoration.

Giving and being generous, and having a great time in spreading cheer and happiness are all virtues, and we do not want to knock them, but we need to see they fall short of the real spirit of Christmas. They are side effects of adoration. If you do not start where the angels started your Christmas can never be what God intended. We need to think-Glory to God. We need to feel-Glory to God. We need to sing-Glory to God. Horatius Bonar wrote-

1.

Glory be to Him who loved us
Washed us from each sinful stain;
Glory be to Him who made us
Priests and kings with Him to reign;
Glory, worship, laud, and blessing
To the Lamb who once was slain.
"Glory, worship, laud, and blessing"-
Thus the choir triumphant sings;
"Honour, riches, power, dominion"-
Thus its praise creation brings;
Thou art worthy, Thou are worthy,
Lord of lords and King of kings.
Glory to the King of angels,
Glory to the Church's King,
Glory to the King of nations,
Heaven and earth His praises sing;
Glory ever and for ever
To the King of Glory bring.

Christmas means salvation to man, but it means Glory to God, and it is never complete unless God gets adoration. If you want to give God the very best you can give, then follow the angels and give Him adoration. We need songs to adequately express adoration. Love songs are so popular because love needs music for its highest expression. The loving heart needs a poem and a tune. Love needs to be sung. That is what adoration is. It is love expressed in a song. Phillips Brooks wrote long ago-

The earth has grown cold with its burden of care
But at Christmas it always is young,
The heart of the jewel burns lustrous and fair;
And its soul full of music breaks forth on the air,

When the song of the angels is sung.

If the heavenly host sang as never before, and they were not even saved by the Savior they sang of, how much more ought we, who are saved by Him, be filled with songs of adoration? Let us remember that the appearance of the angels tells us Christmas is the greatest day of wonder in history. The adoration of the angels tells us, the best we can give to God in response to His gift to us, is the gift of worship and praise. Let us learn from these invisible friends that a true celebration of Christmas will involve wonder and worship. This is the message of the angelic anthem.

CHAPTER THREE

3. CHRISTMAS ANIMALS based on Luke 2:1-20

The angels, the shepherds, and the wise men, along with Mary and Joseph, dominate the scene around the Christ-child, who gave the world the gift of Christmas. But animals also play a role in the greatest story ever told. Being dumb, they could not sing of it or talk of it, and the result is their silence leaves them the most neglected creatures connected with the Incarnation. We usually look at the astronomical witness of the star, or the angelic witness of the heavenly host, but we seldom to never notice the animal witness to the advent of Christ.

There is no escaping the facts, however. In His birth our Lord Jesus identified with the animal kingdom. He was born in a stable meant for the shelter of animals. He was laid in a manger meant for the feeding of animals. The first sounds baby Jesus heard could have been the sound of animals. He was first announced to the shepherds whose whole life revolved around the care, feeding, and protection of animals. The wise men, who represented the Gentile world, made their journey to worship Him on animals. They were likely camels, although horses were not impossible. Mary likely made it to Bethlehem riding on a donkey. Later in His life, Jesus was in a context where He related both to the angels and animals. Mark 1:13 says, "He was with the wild animals, and angels attended Him." This was during His forty days in the wilderness. Angels and animals have this in common, they are both servants of God and man. They are both a part of the Christmas story.

The result of all these facts is a world of Christian art and poetry full of Christmas animals. The famous nativity scenes through the ages include the ox, donkey, sheep, camels, and often the dove. One of our most famous Christmas hymns, Away In A Manger, says, "The cattle are lowing the poor baby wakes but little Lord Jesus no crying He makes."

The emphasis on animals in the birth scene is not part of our contemporary life-style because the majority of people no longer live with animals. Back in the 12th century when everybody had a daily contact with their farm animals, they sang songs that stressed the role of the friendly beast in Christmas. They sang,

**Jesus our brother kind and good
Was humbly born in a stable rude
And the friendly beasts around Him stood.**

This song, sung over 800 years ago by Christians, reveals just how carefully they had thought through the role of animals in the Christmas story. They had each animal tell of what they contributed-

**Thus every beast by some good spell
In the stable dark was glad to tell
Of the gift He gave Immanuel.
I said the donkey shaggy and brown
Carried his mother uphill and down
I carried her safely to Bethlehem town.
I said the cow all white and red
Gave her my manger for His bed.
I gave Him my hay to pillow His head.
I said the sheep with curly horn
Gave Him my wool for His blanket warm.
He wore my coat on Christmas morn.
I said the dove, from the rafters high,
I cooed Him to sleep that He should not cry.
We cooed Him to sleep, my mate and I.
I said the camel yellow and black
Over the desert upon my back.
I brought Him a gift in the wise man's pack.**

All of this may seem superficial and sentimental to us as city people, but keep in mind God did not send His angels to announce Christ's birth to city people. He sent them to people who lived daily in relationship to animals. The Bible world was a very animal oriented world.

I think it is safe to say, every great leader of Israel, male or female, had a life strongly involved with the animal kingdom. Look at just a few highlights.

- 1. Adam and Eve dwelt in a perfect relationship with animals, and Adam even named them all.**
- 2. All of the Patriarchs had animals for their wealth, and the story of their lives could not be told without reference to the animal kingdom.**
- 3. Moses was a shepherd when God met him at the burning bush.**
- 4. David was a shepherd when called to be the king of Israel.**
- 5. Job was an owner of great herds of animals.**
- 6. Most of the prophets used animal imagery constantly, to convey their message.**
- 7. John the Baptist lived with the animals, wore camel skins, and ate locust.**

The list could be greatly expanded, but the point is Bible people were animal lovers. You would have a hard time finding any Bible hero who was not an animal lover. E.F. Schumacker went so far as to make this claim, "There have been no sages or holy men in our or anybody else's history who were cruel to animals or who looked upon them as nothing but utilities, and innumerable are the legends and stories which link sanctity as well as happiness with a loving kindness toward lower creatures."

Therefore, it follows that the greatest King of Israel, the promised Messiah, the Son of David, the Seed of Abraham, the fulfillment of all Old Testament prophecy, should also be in some way connected with the animal kingdom. No where do we see this connection stronger than in the Christmas story. Jesus was the only great person in Israel, as far as we know, to be actually born among the animals. Most would agree with John R. Rice who said, "It is unthinkable that any detail of the birth of Christ could fail to have a universal meaning for the race." The animal atmosphere is an example.

There are millions of stuffed animals given as gifts to children every year at Christmas.

This is more appropriate than we realize. Every major holiday has some animal associated with it for symbolic reasons. The turkey for Thanksgiving; the rabbit for Easter; the donkey for Palm Sunday; the eagle for July 4th. But for Christmas there is no single animal to symbolize it, for the whole animal kingdom is involved. Any animal can be a Christmas animal.

There is an old English wood-cut printed in London in 1631, which illustrates an ancient legend of how even the dumb animals spoke on that Holy Night. In the center of the picture is the Babe with Joseph and Mary, the angels above singing, and the cock crows-Christ is born. The raven in a tree asks-when? The crow replies-this night. The ox cries out-where, where? The sheep near the manger bleats-Bethlehem. It is not meant to be believed that animals talk, but to convey the idea that animals were involved in Christmas.

Much of the symbolism of the Bible is from the animal kingdom. The Bible is a literary zoo. I counted 61 different creatures that could be studied. There are more animals in the Bible than you will find in some zoos. The more we get away from the animal kingdom the more difficult it is to understand many parts of the word of God. If you took all the references to animals out of the Bible you would eliminate more of God's word than you can imagine. A big chunk of the Christmas story is also lost if you remove all references to animals.

The secular world has added a lot of animals to Christmas. The twelve days of Christmas are full of creatures. A partridge in a pear tree; two turtle doves; three French hens; four calling birds; six geese a laying and seven swans a swimming. Our secular culture has raised up one animal that has gained a great deal of popularity and that is Rudolf the red nosed reindeer. He has relevance because he plays the role the camels played in the New Testament story. They got the wise men to Christ with their gifts, and Rudolf gets Santa to the children with his gifts. It is a story of an animal that is a blessing to man.

Animals are such a blessing to man in the Bible that when the Christ-child grew up He took upon Himself the names of these animals. The two most outstanding being the Lion and the Lamb. These two names bring out the two positive characteristics of animals in their relationship to man, and help us see the relevance of the animals of Christmas. The lion represents sovereign service, and the lamb represents sacrificial service. Jesus came to serve and to sacrifice Himself for us. He humbled Himself to be born with the animals because He fulfilled the purpose of the animal kingdom in relationship to mankind in two ways we want to consider in more depth. First let's look at animals and-

I. THEIR SERVICE.

We have already noted that in our secular Christmas, Santa would be a helpless pedestrian without his reindeer. It does not take to great an imagination to see how Rudolf can be a symbol of the Christ who alone had the light, in this dark world, to lead men to receive the gift of salvation. Santa could not deliver his gifts without animal service. The New Testament has another parallel with Rudolf in the donkey Jesus rode on Palm Sunday. He could not have fulfilled the prophecy of the Messiah without the service of this animal. There are some amazing stories of how animals have served men at Christmas.

Jim Stacy was the local postmaster in Calico, California. He picked up a stray dog one day and took him on his rounds. After years of this, Stacy fell ill and was unable to work. But Darsey, his dog, knew the route so well he was able to do the job. Stacy fashioned a harness with double saddlebags and from 1883 to 1886, Darsey the dog delivered the Christmas mail.

In the British post office cats have been on the payroll for over a century. As late as 1953

the assistant post master general assured the House of Commons that female cats were getting the same wages and benefits as male cats. They provide a major service to man by assuring that he gets his mail. Before they hired cats the mice destroyed a lot of mail. In 1868 they began the hiring of cats, and the problem has been solved, and people have been getting their mail un-chewed ever since.

In our own country the famous Pony Express would have been impossible without the service of ponies. In the book of Esther all the Jews are saved by the service of animals in carrying a message to all the lands. Paul's life was spared by means of horses.

History is filled with examples of how animals provide man with service that is vital to his comfort and progress. John said of Jesus, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." That was his greatest service to mankind. He was also the Lion of the tribe of Judah. As such, he provided the service of a protector. The Lion, as king of the jungle, was used all through history as the symbol of protection. Huge statues of lions sat before the palaces of kings, and other important government buildings. The figures of 12 lions lined the steps leading to Solomon throne in addition to the two lions standing beside his armrests. God is represented by the lion, and Israel is, and Jesus is.

In one of the great prophetic messages of the Bible pointing to the Christ-child there is a strong emphasis on the effects He will have on the animal kingdom. In Isaiah 11 we read of the shoot that will come from the stump of Jesse. This descendant of David will be a righteous judge among people, but listen to what he accomplishes in the animal kingdom in verses 11 thru 9- "The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together: and a little child will lead them. The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The infant will play near the hole of the cobra, and the young child put his hand into the vipers nest. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea."

The Christmas scene of baby Jesus and the friendly animals surrounding Him is symbolic of what this baby will do for animals and men in reconciling them, and making them one family. Animals were hurt by man's sin, and they suffer in a fallen world. Christmas and the Incarnation mark the beginning of their restoration as well as our own. As the Lion of the tribe of Judah He came to save the animal kingdom from the fall, and all of the evil and suffering it has led to for animals.

Paul makes it clear that the salvation Christ brought is not exclusive to man, but covers all creation. Isaac Watts was a great animal lover and in his famous Christmas hymn, Joy To The World, makes it clear that animals are in on the joy. In the third stanza he writes, "He came to make His blessings flow far as the curse is found, far as the curse is found, far as, far as the curse is found." In other words, He came to bless the animal kingdom as well as man, for they too are under the curse. In Romans 8:20-23, Paul writes, "For the creation was subject to frustration, not by it's own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies."

Paul is saying that we are already saved in the inner man, but the part of us which is animal, the body, is not yet redeemed. We wait as does the whole animal kingdom for that final and complete salvation that saves the animal kingdom including our animal nature-the

body. When this happens the whole of physical creation will also be redeemed. This means that for all eternity animals will be our friends and our servants. Horse lovers will be delighted to note that even before eternity the horse is one of heaven's greatest servants. The horse pulled the chariot that swept down and took Elijah into heaven. The book of Revelation pictures Jesus riding His white horse to victory. Call it symbolic if you wish, but there is no way to escape the Biblical teaching that the literal animal kingdom will share in the salvation that Christ brought to this earth. Animal lover's often go to extremes, and I have heard of some who will not even eat animal crackers, but extremes ought not to block our minds to the Biblical truth about the positive relationship of man and animals.

In the middle ages there was a popular story that has become a modern day movie- **Androcles And The Lion**. Androcles was a runaway slave who met a lion limping with a thorn in it's paw. He pulled the thorn out. Later he was captured and sentenced to fight lion's in the arena. The lion loosed on him was none other than the one he had helped. The lion recognized him, and in gratitude licked Androcles in the face, and then protected him from the other lions. The Emperor was so impressed by this miracle he pardoned Androcles and gave him his freedom. Saved by a lion! All of us are so saved from the lion who goes about seeking whom he may devour by the Lion of the tribe of Judah. He will also save the animal kingdom from this lion, and man and beast will live in peace, and be of service to God. The second theme we want to consider about animals is-

II. THEIR SACRIFICE.

Animals have to die for us to live. It is their greatest service to man that they die for his life and pleasure. The first animals on record who died, did so to provide Adam and Eve with clothing. Their sacrifice was necessary because of man's sin. Millions of animals have died since in sacrifice for man's sin. Jesus is called the Lamb of God because He did, once and for all, what sheep had been doing all through history-dieing as a sacrifice for sin. The Passover lamb was sacrificed, and the people of Israel were spared by it's shed blood. Jesus became our Passover Lamb, and made it possible by His sacrifice for all to escape the judgment of God.

Now we no longer need sheep or any other animal for sacrifice. People in Bible times had to raise spotless and pure animals as part of their spiritual life of obedience to God. But Jesus made this unnecessary. Then the modern industrial revolution made animals unnecessary in many areas of life. The result is we have lost touch with the significance of the animal world. Yet everyday our lives are dependent on the sacrifice of animals-not only the fish, fowl and barnyard creatures, but the multitude of minute animal creatures that make our bodies function properly. Even the strongest vegetarian would be shocked if he realized how many tiny animals he consumes everyday in his water and his vegetables. No vegetarian would be alive today without the sacrifice of animals.

Sometimes even the animals not intended for human food are crucial for man's survival. When the German's surrounded Paris to starve them out in the Franco-Prussian War, the zoo became a food supply, and the people ate the kangaroo, the wolf, the camel and the elephant. The same thing happened to the London zoo in World War II. People were even eating giraffe cutlets. The furred, the finny, and the feathered all went into the frying pan for the salvation of man. Man saved the animal kingdom when Noah built the ark, and so it is fitting that the animal kingdom would often be the salvation of man.

We live in a culture where the humane society plays a major role, and where the animal kingdom is treated with high respect. There are also animal hospitals everywhere in any large city. Walt Disney contributed to this greatly by making animal creatures very popular

and person-like. C.S.Lewis has been to the Christian world what Disney was to the secular world. His series of Narnia books exalts the animal kingdom. The land of Narnia is under the rule of Aslan, the Christlike Lion. He created it out of nothing and thus we see the lion represents God. All of the animals think and talk and are raised to the human level.

In all his works Lewis pictures the animal kingdom as ideal, and then man comes along and makes a mess of it by his evil. Man brought down the animal kingdom and they had to suffer with him. But they are destined to be friends and rise again to the level of peace and oneness. In other words, the goal of God is a happy ending for man and animals together. Lewis pictures the universal chorus of praise in heaven as being, not of voices only, but of purrs, grunts and squeals of delight from the animal kingdom as they join man in this song of eternal thanksgiving.

When Martin Luther read Romans 8:21 about the creation itself being liberated from its bondage, he looked at his little dog and said, "Ja! Thou too shalt have a little golden tail!" The world of poetry is filled with such sentiments.

I do not know the future ways,
I can but dimly see,
Just what within that Unseen Land
There is of bird or tree:
But could that heaven my heaven be
If there were not some woodland friends
To meet with Christ and me?

The shepherds who went that first Christmas to see the Christ-child no doubt felt this way about their lambs. We forget that the lamb was often to the Jew what the dog is in our culture-the family pet. People have always loved their pets on a level close to children. When God saves families in the Bible, He saves their animals with them.

1. In the ark God saved animals as well as people. The promise He gave was to the animals as well as men. Read it and see for yourself.
2. In the Exodus animals were included in the greatest deliverance of Israel.
3. In the deliverance of Nineveh, because of their repentance, God made it a point that He had compassion not only on the children but on the animals.
4. God gave the Sabbath to save man from self-imposed slavery and He made it clear that animals were also to get that day of rest.

The whole plan of God is summed up by David in Psalm 36:5-6, "Your love, O Lord, reaches to the heavens, your faithfulness to the skies. Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains, your justice like the great deep. O Lord, you preserve both man and beast."

When Saul Kane is converted in a country drinking house, a very unlikely place, John Masefield in, *The Everlasting Mercy*, has him say a very unusual thing to describe what happened to him.

I did not think, I did not strive,
The deep peace burnt my me alive;
The bolted door had broken in,
I knew that I had done with sin.
I knew that Christ had given me birth
To brother all the souls on earth,
And every bird and every beast
Should share the crumbs broke at the feast.

From Eden to eternity animals are partners with men. When God saw that it was good after He had created the animal kingdom, He loved and enjoyed what He had made. He has no intention of letting the sin of Satan and the fall of man rob Him of an eternity of enjoying the animal kingdom. They will be a part of the new heaven and the new earth for the pleasure of God and man. That is why Jesus humbled Himself to be identified with them as well as with man in the Incarnation. Thus we are to look upon the Christmas animals, not as mere incidental props but as a very real part of the plan of God. We will begin a taste of the eternity God has planned if we learn to love, even in time, the Christmas animals.

CHAPTER FOUR

4. THE APPROACHABLE GOD based on Luke 2:8-20

Lucy is expounding on the meaning of Christmas and she says, "this is the time of the year that we show kindness and good will, when we accept others and welcome them into our home." Charlie Brown says, "why can't we be kind and accepting all through the year and not just at Christmas?" Lucy looks at him and says, " what are you, some kind of religious fanatic?" That is the way many people feel about those who would want to be a Christian even after Christmas.

There is something unreal about the Christmas spirit that only lasts till the lights and tinsel are put back into the attic. A seasonal Christian who reveals some kind of religious interest at Christmas only is not a real Christian.

It is not fanaticism but normal Christian living to have the Christmas spirit all year long. One of the problems with the Christmas season is that people feel they have to try and cram too much Christian living into too small a segment of time. David Grayson said, "I sometimes think we expect too much of Christmas day. We try to crowd into it the long arrears of kindness and humanity of the whole year. As for me, I like to take my Christmas a little at a time, all through the year." There is no magic in December 25 that cannot be experienced any other day on which you decide to honor the gift of God, and praise Him for the Lord Jesus.

The real fanatic is the one who thinks you can get your religious devotion done at Christmas-who thinks thanking and praising God is a minor part-time commitment that can be gotten out of the way through a special event or two. The gift of God is unreal to one with such a mind. It is not just the tree, but the whole of Christmas is artificial to those who do not treasure the gift of God everyday of the year.

In the comic strip "Tiger", two little boys are talking and the one says, "We got an artificial tree this year." The other boy asked, "Doesn't it bother you?" He replied, "No, not as long as the presents are real!" That is to be the Christians attitude. Everything can be artificial and superficial, but he or she will still have the Christmas spirit because God's Present is real. Ray Phillips said, "Christmas is real. It's the rest of the year that is a myth." If the gift of God is real then all of life is made real by this ultimate reality in Christ. The poet put it beautifully-

**Yet more and more we know Thee real,
And marvel more and more to see
Thine infinite Reality.
Reality, reality,
Lord Jesus Christ Thou art to me!
My glorious king, my Lord, my God,
Life is too short for half the laud,
For half the debt of praise I owe,
For this blest knowledge that "I know
The reality of Jesus Christ,"-
Unmeasured blessing, gift unpriced!
Will I not praise Thee when I see
In the long noon of Eternity
Unveiled, Thy "Bright reality"?**

In the popular children's story, The Valveteen Rabbit, by Margery Williams, the rabbit asks the toy horse that was so bald in patches because of hundreds of hours of being held and rubbed, "what is real"? The horse replies-"Real isn't how you are made. It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long time, not just to play with, but really loves you, then you become real". For some, the baby Jesus is just another toy they play with. Its fun, but they never really come to love the gift of God. But for those who do, Jesus is a gift that is loved and treasured not just at Christmas, but every day. He is real and not just a seasonal plaything. The poet says it so well-

**Lets have Christmas every day
The gladness and the heartfelt mirth,
Good will towards men and peace on earth;
The simple joy of giving things
To gain the joy that giving brings.
The practicing of what we preach
In word and deed, in thought and speech.
Lets have Christmas every day-
Its wrong to wait the weary year
to bring some fellow creature cheer.
We should adopt the better plan
Of doing good whenever we can.
But do it now, next Christmas may
Not come at all-Let's live today!**

If the Christmas gift is real to you, then the Christmas spirit will be real to you every day. This was the spirit of the shepherds. As soon as the angels were gone they said lets go see this thing that has happened. These men did not know it was Christmas for the holiday did not yet exist. It was just another day, but one of great excitement now. They did not say to themselves, we have seen the supernatural-angels have spoken to us- we will be famous. They did not run to reporters to try and get on the front page or discuss what memorial they should erect in memory of this encounter. Their field never became anything but a field for they had a proper focus on what was real.

Many a place where people have seen visions become places where people build temples, and others make pilgrimages to worship there. But this is all a dealing with the unreal. The

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