

**GENESIS 3:1–15; 12:1–2; 15:1–6; 17:1–6;
ISAIAH 7:9b–16; 8:11–15; 9:2, 6–7;
MICAH 5:2**

Psalm 72: 1–10, 17

GOD'S PROMISE OF THE MESSIAH

Story Notes

File no 100

Genesis 3:1–15

God dealt with what Adam & Eve had done but he secured his own purpose by making a promise about a 'Seed' or Son who would destroy all that the Serpent had initiated. From the beginning, we have had the promise of this coming Son of woman who would accomplish all God's purpose.

Adam and Eve rebelled against God by listening to the temptation of the serpent or Satan. It would seem that Satan's plan rather than God's would succeed. But God told Satan that a child born to the woman would crush his head. We should always regard Satan as the one who will be crushed by this son.

Christ is this son, born among us, but also, God's Son. God has taught us to trust in his Son and not give up when we see the trouble that sin has caused.

Genesis 12:1-2; 15:1-6; 17:1-6

God had promised that Abraham would be a blessing in the world (Gen. 12:1-2) but he had no son through which that could happen. Now God would enable him, although very old, to have a son. Abraham believed this, and God regarded him as a righteous man, not because of what he had done but because he believed what God said about the coming son.

Isaiah 7:9b-16; 8:11-15; 9:2, 6–7

Israel waited and wondered to see how God would fulfill his promise. If they would not believe, they would not be helped by God (Isa. 7:9). King Ahaz would not believe, but God still showed him that he was faithful through the birth of a baby, called Emmanuel, who would still be a baby when all the troubles Ahaz worried about were gone. Then, God would surely give them a son who would be a counsellor working wonders, the mighty God and everlasting Father among them and he would establish peace by his reign.

Micah 5:2

Among the uncertain days that lay ahead, Micah saw a time when Jerusalem would be surrounded with armies. But to the South, in Bethlehem, a king would be born. David's origins had been in Bethlehem, and now, another David would arise to lead his people like a shepherd (I Sam. 5:4).

The Gospel writer, Matthew, recognised that this king was Jesus Christ (Matt. 2:6) who had been purposed from ancient times to be Israel's king. God had never abandoned his people but would give them a king, whose strength and majesty were in God, and who would be acknowledged in the world. He would establish peace (Isa 9:7) and raise up a leadership to withstand the enemy.

LUKE 1:5-56

THE ANGEL VISITS ZECHARIAH AND MARY

Story Notes

File no. 101

Luke 1:5-25

How could we live if God did not visit us? But then, when he comes, he must remove our fear because we become accustomed to living with him far away. Zechariah is like Abram (Gen. 15:1); God came to him and said 'Fear not' and promised him a son. He had come then, and had come again, to speak peace to his people (c.f. Ps.85:8-9).

Perhaps Zechariah did not pray for a son, not consciously anyway. He may have prayed with others (v. 10) for the redemption of Israel (cf. Luke 2:38). What we know is that God heard him and answered according to his own promise made to Abraham. What was going to happen would bring joy to Zechariah and many others, not just a son, but a son who would announce the coming salvation.

The child would be filled with God's Spirit and be great before the Lord. He would be like Elijah. Through him, parents would again delight in their children's faithfulness to the Lord and children would be grateful for their parents teaching (Mal. 4:6).

Some think this could mean that Israel's forefathers would acknowledge their children as true people of faith (cf. Isa. 63:16).

Zechariah was righteous but unbelieving. When it came to something actually happening, he was mastered by his impotence rather than by the Lord, who could do something as amazing as turn the hearts of his people back to righteousness.

The angel was speaking from God's presence. Zechariah would be dumb until his wife bore their child. The child would most certainly be born. So Zechariah was prepared by God to make his wonderful announcement of God's coming salvation, and those who waited outside the temple knew that God had revealed himself to their priest in a vision.

Then, Elizabeth knew, as the baby developed, that the Lord's word was true. She would not feel ashamed any more of having no child. In time, the Lord would take away the shame of all his people.

Luke 1:26-38

The same Gabriel told Mary that God was with her. Like Zechariah, this brought her great fear, but it was favour, not fear, the angel had come to announce. And not just to her but to us all. She would have a child, who would be the Son of God, successor to David's throne, and he would reign forever. Jesus would fulfill Psalm 2 and be the King/Son who would rule the nations.

Not surprisingly, Mary asked how this could happen. She was a virgin, but the Spirit of God would overshadow her and this holy Child would be God's Son. God helped her further with news of her elderly but pregnant cousin, Elizabeth, and the reminder that, for God, nothing is impossible.

With obedient faith, she gave herself over to God for his purpose. The whole coming of God to Mary, and to us, and his coming in grace, must remain a work of God to be received obediently and with no greater explanation than that it is a work of the Holy Spirit.

Luke 1:39-56

Mary eagerly made the journey to her auntie, Elizabeth. Both of them knew that God was working a miracle in giving them a baby, and both of them knew that they were sharing in God's coming to save the world. God would take away their shame, and ours as well. God would be able to do anything necessary to bring it about.

THE ANGEL VISITS ZECHARIAH AND MARY con't

The baby inside Elizabeth's womb gave a leap of joy when she heard that Mary had come. John was already filled with the Spirit and Elizabeth already had great joy (Luke 1:14-15). We do not know if Elizabeth had heard about Mary's baby, but her baby knew! Then, by the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth knew that Mary was the mother of 'my Lord', the one for whom her son would prepare the way (Luke 1:17) and the one whom she would obey. She knew that Mary was even more blessed than her, and her baby more blessed. And Mary was blessed because she had believed the angel's message. Elizabeth was humbled that the mother of this child would visit her.

Mary was alive with joy in God her Saviour. She knew she was just an ordinary and sinful person, but now, God had come to bless her. The blessing of being the mother of our Lord was hers alone, but the mightiness that did this 'great thing' for her was God's mercy for all his people, those who feared him. God would fulfil his covenant which humanity had broken.

God's exultation of Mary and humbling of the proud was not so much to give her justice in a social sense but to give her reason to praise God.

Her enemies may have been those who scorned her hasty marriage, or those who had not honoured her as a woman, or perhaps those who did not honour the God she served. Whoever they were, she knew that no enemy could prevent God's purpose from being fulfilled in her life.

She returned home ready for all that was to come.

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LUKE 1: 57–80

ELIZABETH'S BABY: JOHN THE BAPTIST

Story Notes

File no. 102

Everyone expected Zechariah's and Elizabeth's child to be named after his father but God had already named him 'John' (Luke 1:13), meaning 'Jehovah is gracious'. Here is Zechariah's opportunity to confess the truth of God's word to him and he confirms what he had already conveyed to his wife: 'His name is John'. He is now obedient to the divine word, back in the full stream of the promises given to Israel. Then, both his heart and his tongue are loosed in a wonderful song of praise. Its theme is, 'God will save us!' or rather, 'God *has* saved us!'

God has worked in Zechariah, and he is ready to announce that God has worked on behalf of all Israel: he has '*accomplished* redemption' and '*shown* mercy' (the same verb in both phrases means 'to enact'). The Messiah is not yet born but his arrival and victory are as good as done!

The song tells us that all of the covenant promises given to Israel will now be fulfilled. The redemption begun in the exodus under Moses has not produced an obedient people, and they are still in captivity to the nations. But now, as promised, a new Davidic King will set them free. He is a 'horn' or strong leader to bring salvation. The result of this (not the cause of it as Israel proudly thought) will be that Israel will serve the Lord without fear, and in holiness and righteousness. God is revealing his faithfulness to promises made to Abraham (v. 73) and to David (v. 69), a faithfulness that Zechariah, had nearly forgotten.

Zechariah has been full of this news of Messiah, but now, he speaks of his own son. He will 'go before' or 'prepare' the way for the Lord (fulfilling Isaiah 40:3-5 and Malachi 3:1; 4:5). The prophecies indicate that it is the Lord who is coming, but now, the 'Lord' he is preceding is his still-to-be-born cousin, Jesus.

Israel thought their enemies were the Romans, but, in fact, it was any power that prevented them from knowing and serving God. This salvation or redemption will now be announced to Israel through John, by announcing the forgiveness of their sins. (So Acts 5:31; Eph 1:7). God's 'sunrise' (Num. 24:17; Mal. 4:2; cf. 2 Pet. 1:19) is the sending of his own Son to Israel. He will bring light and peace to his people. Again, all this is God enacting his mercy.

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MATTHEW 1:18–25 & LUKE 2:1–20

THE BIRTH OF JESUS AND VISIT OF THE SHEPHERDS

Story Notes.

File no. 103

Jesus came to fulfil promises made to Abraham (the father of the nation) and to David (the beginning of Israel's monarchy). Both of these men had been promised that a son of theirs would be God's means of blessing or of saving the world, and they looked forward to his day. This son would be God's chosen one, anointed with oil for his task. (Messiah or Christ means anointed one.) Jesus was descended from these two men.

Matthew 1:18–25

The story begins with what appears to be Mary's unfaithfulness to her fiancée, and Joseph's dismay in this. (Betrothal was a legal bond under Jewish law.) A dream-visit by an angel changes all this. Joseph is addressed as 'son of David', perhaps alerting him to the significance of this birth. The child is the work of the Holy Spirit and is already named by God (the Father of the child). He is to be called 'Jesus', meaning 'saviour', because he will, in a way that David could never do, save his people from their sins.

Israel is far from trusting in God, but he is giving a sign of his presence with them, a young child called 'Immanuel'. The prophecy originates from another time when Israel was unbelieving and God gave a sign of his presence (Isa. 7:10–16). Now, in Mary's womb, God is with his people., Joseph is told not to be afraid of taking Mary as his wife. He shows his righteousness, not in maintaining appearances, but in obeying the messenger of God, and he allows the work of God to proceed without his compromising it. So Jesus is born.

Luke 2:1–20

Luke is eager for us to know where the birth of Jesus fits in world history because it is central to the world's history and future. The detail he gives concerning the Emperor, the Governor and the census can be accurately linked with secular history.

By this census, God arranges for his Son to be born in David's birthplace, because he is David's descendant and true heir. But, his birth is even more humble than David's; he begins life in an animal barn. His first guests, appropriately from God's point of view, are similarly lowly. Shepherds were low on the social scale in these times. The only qualification mentioned for their being notified is that they are nearby; they can find the child and make a visit straight away. In fact, the news is for 'all the people'.

The story of the Lord's angel meeting these shepherds must be one of the happiest stories in the Bible. It is one of those times when the joy of heaven (c.f. Ps. 16:11) is revealed to humanity. The glory of God shines now, not in the temple but in the open air and in the sight of shepherds. Angels live habitually with God and know his joy and do not doubt that he will do whatever he announces. This angel may be Gabriel, who was sent to Zachariah and to Mary (1:11, 19, 26).

The shepherds' fear is understandable but must not prevent them hearing the good news. A 'Saviour' in the 'city of David', that is, 'Christ the Lord', is born. Here is the hope of all Israel. We may say that this is the reason why Israel exists, to be the nation in which is born the world's Saviour. The baby will be identified by its being newly born (still in swaddling cloths) and in a barn (lying in a manger). Shepherds will be better placed than most to follow such directions.

A choir of angels now sings God's praise for what he is doing, and recognises what this means for the world: 'peace among those with whom God is pleased'. Clearly, the shepherds are among those with whom God is pleased, not because they have fulfilled the law or have status within Judaism, but because they believe the message, see the child and tell everyone about what they have heard. Peace is the gift of God for all who will accept the message of this Messiah (Luke 10:6; 19:42; 24:36).

THE BIRTH OF JESUS AND VISIT OF THE SHEPHERDS con't

The significance of what is happening comes through to Mary by this visit, and she treasures the word she hears through these shepherds.

A young couple with a young family faced the prospect of the mother's death by cancer. In their Christmas greeting during this time, they said, 'When we were children we all dreamed of the "perfect Christmas". It takes time to realise that the "perfect Christmas" is the one with Jesus in His rightful place and that the rest is simply tinsel and wrapping paper'.

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LUKE 2:21–40

SIMEON AND ANNA: THE BABY IN THE TEMPLE

Story Notes

File no. 104

Israel's rituals and laws were no mere form but kept worshippers aware of their identity and calling until the time of their fulfilment in Christ. Circumcision taught Israel to remove from their hearts whatever was alien to their worship of God (Deut. 10:16) and obliged them to keep the law of God. Jesus will be part of this holy community, and so, he is circumcised. Then, the law said a woman was ceremonially unclean after childbirth and that she could be cleansed by a sacrifice. There was nothing sinful about having children or having menstrual periods but reverence for God was maintained by this practice. Joseph and Mary were poor so they offered the small offering prescribed for them (Lev. 12:2-8). Finally, a firstborn child was holy to the Lord from the time when the Lord had spared the firstborn at the time of the exodus. Firstborn sons had not just been spared but redeemed by the offering of a lamb. Subsequent generations remembered this with an appropriate offering (Ex. 13:2, 14-15). Holy living, removing of uncleanness by sacrifice and the gift of redemption were all part of the heritage Jesus had.

Israel has drifted far from God but some are waiting eagerly for the *consolation, salvation or redemption* of Israel through the promised Messiah or Christ (Isa. 46:13; 49:6; 51:4f; 52:10; 59:20; Ps. 111:9; 130:7f). No political change could effect this. It would take a redemption greater than the events of the exodus. Simeon kept the law, worshipped God and, by the Spirit upon him, had a prophetic gift (Num. 11:25, 29; 2 Pet. 1:21) to know that he would see the Messiah before he died. The Spirit reveals what cannot be seen, and Simeon could see, in this newborn child, God's salvation, and was happy to die. This salvation would be for all the nations, a vision far greater than most Israelites shared at the time, but it would bring glory to the nation as the bearers of this good news.

At a later time, the disciples still wonder about the redemption that this Jesus would bring (Luke 24:21).

Again, the parents of Jesus are amazed, but they are warned of the change that will happen in Israel because of their child, a raising up of the lowly and bringing down of the mighty (c.f. Luke 1: 50-55), and much opposition that will bring bitterness to Mary in time.

Like Simeon, Anna is looking for what God alone can do, more than the normal pleasures of life, and lives to pray for this day. She comes with the thanks that only long waiting can raise, and with eager sharing of this news with others.

From here on, we learn nothing of Jesus until he is 12 years of age. There is nothing unusual about a boy growing in strength, and even in wisdom, except that, for Israel, growing in wisdom was growing in the fear of God and running from evil (Job 28:28; cf. James 3:17). But what will it mean that the grace of the Lord is upon him? The word can mean beauty or kindness, and perhaps this is meant. God has perfect satisfaction in his Son. Clearly, he does not need grace in the sense of unmerited favour for himself, but by inference, we may say that the grace of God for all his fellow creatures is upon him. The effect of this is briefly indicated when Jesus is 12; he grows in favour with God and with man (Luke 2:52; cf. 1 Sam. 2:26; Luke 1:80).

MATTHEW 2:1–23

THE WISE MEN WORSHIP JESUS

Story Notes

File no. 105

God revealed to certain wise men that a great Jewish king had been born. We do not know how they came to know this but it is natural enough that they headed for Jerusalem. Where else would they go to find a Jewish king? In this way, God showed that the nations were ready to come to the light of Israel's Messiah (Isa. 60:1–7). At the same time, the effect of their enquiry was to give official notice to Israel that the King he had promised to them had been born. This should have been a time of great joy for the whole nation.

Israel's scholars had to go to the Scripture to locate the place of Messiah's birth (Micah 5:1–7). Reading this text gave them opportunity to respond to this great thing God was doing among them. A king had arisen who would 'feed his flock in the strength of the Lord'. The time for the renewal of their nation had come. Their Messiah had been born.

Again, how these wise men recognized a star as standing over the place where the child was is a mystery. But their joy was exceedingly great (cf. the joy at the resurrection – 28:8). In contrast, Herod's malice and fear was also exceedingly great and the nation was diverted from its calling of receiving its Messiah.

Joseph had begun living by the word of God rather than the fear of man and was now guided by an angel in order to provide protection for this Son of God.

The identity and history of this Jesus had been anticipated in the prophecies given to Israel, including the tragedy of Herod's jealous rage. While the nation as a whole did not pay attention to them, some were led on in faith to anticipate the greater things that God would do.

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