



*A Classic*  
*Nativity*

DEVOTIONAL



*compiled by*  
JAMES STUART BELL



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*A Classic Nativity Devotional*

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## *Luke Nativity Narration*



*From the Gospel according to Luke, chapter 2, verses 1-35*

"In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) 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.

"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.'

"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, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

"On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise him, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he had been conceived.

"When the time of their purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, 'Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord'), and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: 'a pair of doves or two young pigeons.'

"Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:

'Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,  
you now dismiss your servant in peace.  
For my eyes have seen your salvation,

which you have prepared in the sight of all people,  
a light for revelation to the Gentiles  
and for glory to your people Israel.'

"The child's father and mother marveled at what was said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: 'This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.'"

Because the Christmas service is the most frequently attended church service each year, this Scripture reading is probably the most familiar passage to Christians of all backgrounds and levels of commitment. It has a grace, beauty, and wonder to it that never grows stale. Nothing in all of creation, in all of history, can compare to this event—the beginning of God's perfect revelation to us in our very own form—a human being with all its limitations, yet God of very God. Let us kneel in worship and praise God for his lavish gift.



## *Introduction*



On a quiet night two millennia ago in a tiny, peaceful village in the land we now know as Israel, an event took place that would profoundly and irrevocably change the course of the world as we know it.

That evening, some simple shepherds—young people who spent their time protecting valuable flocks of sheep from thieves, poachers, and wild animals—received the news. The stillness and solitude of the evening was suddenly and brilliantly broken by the terrifying yet spectacular sight and sound of an angel of God appearing to them with some incredible news. The angel’s message, at first soothing but then astounding, went like this:

“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.”

LUKE 2:10-12

This was the news these young people—as well as their Jewish brethren past and present—had so desperately and longingly waited for: The Messiah had come! After the Jewish people spent centuries waiting for their God to fulfill the promises he had made so long ago, the One they had all waited for had come.

There was nothing else they could do. “Let’s go to Bethlehem

and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about” (Luke 2:15). They did just that, and because they were willing to drop everything they were doing that night and travel to the town of Bethlehem, they saw for themselves—even became part of—what Christians have come to know as the original Nativity.

This is the event that was the beginning of what Christians know as the Incarnation, or as the apostle John put it, when “the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (John 1:14).

Since that night, most of the Christian world has adopted as one of its annual celebrations the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ. While the holiday that came to be known as “Christmas” has gone through countless twists and turns over the centuries—and while its origins are still a source of debate for some believers—it remains in the minds and lives of Christians a commemoration of an event that changed the world forever.

Christianity’s past (as well as its present) is rich with tradition and writings surrounding the birth of Christ. In the few centuries following the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, hundreds of years before Christmas became a holiday, the church fathers wrote passionately of the birth of Jesus and the events surrounding it, all of which they recognized as a spectacular example of the providence of God.

Since those early years of the Christian faith, believers of all shades and stripes of the faith have written and spoken about the birth of Christ—about the announcements of angels, about the young virgin girl chosen of God to be his mother, about Joseph her betrothed, about their trip to the town of Bethlehem, and about the visits of shepherds and magi from the east.

That work continues to this very day, and it includes the motion picture *The Nativity Story*, which opens worldwide in December 2006 and provides the inspiration for this book.

This book is a collection of writings—sermons, prose, poems, and hymns—all written to commemorate the day God appeared on earth as a man, the day our Savior was born. It includes works of early church fathers (the first four or so centuries following Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension back to heaven), of leading Catholics throughout the centuries, of Orthodox sources, and of Protestant sources. Some of the names are well-known, and some are more obscure.

What these writings have in common, as diverse as their sources may be, is this: They express wonder at a God who loved humanity so much that he humbled his own Son by allowing him not only to be born of a virgin, but to be born in the meanest of circumstances.

The purpose of this book is to help you share in the wonderment of those long-ago events and what they mean to you personally. It's to get you to understand the profound love of a God who saw the fallen, wicked, hurting condition of humanity as a whole and said, "I'll go to save them myself." It is to get you to look upon the birth of Jesus Christ with the same amazement as a man named John Chrysostom, the "Golden-Mouthed" preacher/church father from the fourth and fifth centuries, who once exclaimed,

I behold a new and wondrous mystery! My ears resound to the shepherd's song, piping no soft melody, but loudly chanting a heavenly hymn! The angels sing! The archangels blend their voices in harmony! The cherubim resound their joyful praise! The Seraphim exalt His glory!

All join to praise this holy feast, beholding the Godhead here on earth, and man in heaven. He who is above now, for our salvation, dwells here below; and we, who were lowly, are exalted by divine mercy! Today Bethlehem

resembles heaven, hearing from the stars the singing  
of angelic voices and, in place of the sun, witnessing the  
rising of the Sun of Justice!


So read and enjoy. Read not just during what we have come to  
know as the Christmas season but also during those times when  
you need to rekindle your gratefulness and astonishment at the  
arrival of our Lord into this world.




NATIVITY ONE

*God's  
Loving Gift*





*In the Bleak Midwinter*



In the bleak midwinter  
Frosty wind made moan,  
Earth stood hard as iron,  
Water like a stone;  
Snow had fallen, snow on snow,  
Snow on snow,  
In the bleak midwinter,  
Long ago.

Our God, Heaven cannot hold Him  
Nor earth sustain;  
Heaven and earth shall flee away  
When He comes to reign.  
In the bleak midwinter  
A stable-place sufficed  
The Lord God Almighty,  
Jesus Christ.

Enough for Him, Whom cherubim  
Worship night and day,  
Breastful of milk  
And a mangerful of hay;  
Enough for Him, Whom angels


Fall before,  
The ox and ass and camel  
Which adore.

Angels and archangels  
May have gathered there,  
Cherubim and seraphim  
Thronged the air,  
But His mother only,  
In her maiden bliss,  
Worshipped the beloved  
With a kiss.


What can I give Him,  
Poor as I am?  
If I were a shepherd  
I would bring a lamb,  
If I were a Wise Man  
I would do my part;  
Yet what I can I give Him:  
Give my heart.

—CHRISTINA ROSSETTI (1830–1882)

There is nothing we can give God to repay him for the gift of his Son, Jesus Christ. But what we can do is give to him what he came to claim for himself in the first place: our hearts. God has already given us the greatest Christmas gift in history. All he wants in return is all that we are.



*Christ's Nativity:  
God's Gift Just for Us*



*Adapted from a sermon by John Wycliffe (1324–1384)*

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

According to the joy the Bible reveals, we may say on Christmas Day that a child is born to us—for we believe that Jesus Christ was born on this day. It is God's spoken and written Word that tells us, both in figure and in letter, that a child is born to us, and it is in him that we should have this joy. And three short words are to be spoken from Isaiah's speech so that men may afterward joy in the service of this child.

First, we believe that since our first elders had sinned, there must be satisfaction made by the righteousness of God. For as God is merciful, so is he full of righteousness. But how should he judge all the world unless he kept righteousness in it? For the Lord against whom this sin was done is God almighty; and no sin may be done except against God. And the greater the Lord is against whom the sin is done, the more is that sin to be punished by this Lord. It would be a great sin

to act against the king's bidding; but that sin which is done against God's bidding would be even more without excuse.

According to our belief, God told Adam not to eat of the fruit. But he broke God's command, and he was not excused in that sin, neither by his own folly (or weakness), nor by Eve, nor by the serpent. And so by the righteousness of God this sin must always be punished. And it is a light word to say that God must of his power forgive this sin without the justification that was made for this trespass. For God might do this if he would; but his justice will not permit anything else except that each trespass must be punished, either on earth or in hell. And God may not accept a person, and forget his sin, without satisfaction—else he must give men and angels free permission to sin. And then sin were no sin, and our God were no god. And this is the first lesson that we take from our faith.

The second teaching that we take is that he who should make satisfaction for the sin of our first father must be both God and man. For as mankind trespassed, so must mankind make satisfaction. And therefore it could not be that an angel should make satisfaction for man, for neither has he the right, nor was his the nature that sinned here. But since all men are one person, that person makes satisfaction for man, if any member of this person makes satisfaction for all of this person.

And in this way we see that if God made another man who was after the nature of Adam, he would be obligated to God as much as he might be for himself, and so he might not make satisfaction both for himself and for Adam's sins. And since satisfaction had to be made also for Adam's sin, as it is said, such a person that must make the satisfaction must be

both God and man; for the worthiness of this person's deeds must be equal to the unworthiness of the sin.

The third teaching that must follow these two is that the child is born to man to make satisfaction for man's sin. And this child must be God and man, given to man. And he must bear his empire upon his shoulder and suffer for man. And this child is Jesus Christ, who we suppose was born today.

If we truly desire that this child be born to us, we have joy of this child, and we follow him in three virtues: in righteousness, and meekness, and patience for our God. For whoever condemns Christ unto his death, against the spirit, shall be condemned of this Child, even as all others shall be saved. And thus the joy of this child that was meek and full of virtues should make men to be little in malice. Then they observe well the season.

To them who will fight and chide, I say, to this child who is born as Prince of Peace, and loves peace; and condemns contrary men, who are contrary to peace. For we study how Christ came in the fullness of time when he should; and how he came in meekness, as his birth teaches us; and how he came in patience from his birth to his death; and we follow him in these three because of the joy that we have in him. For this joy, in this patience of Christ, brings us to a joy that shall last forever.

Jesus Christ came to earth two thousand years ago—born as an ordinary infant but still possessing all the attributes and character of divinity—as God's gift to a needy, sinful, lost human-kind. It was our sin that made it necessary for him to come, but it was our heavenly Father's incredible grace, mercy, and love that made the event possible.





*On the Morning of  
Christ's Nativity*



This is the month, and this the happy morn  
Wherein the Son of Heav'n's eternal King,  
Of wedded Maid, and Virgin Mother born,  
Our great redemption from above did bring;  
For so the holy sages once did sing,  
That he our deadly forfeit should release,  
And with his Father work us a perpetual peace.

That glorious Form, that Light unsufferable,  
And that far-beaming blaze of Majesty,  
Wherewith he wont at Heav'n's high council-table,  
To sit the midst of Trinal Unity,  
He laid aside, and here with us to be,  
Forsook the courts of everlasting day,  
And chose with us a darksome house of mortal clay.

Say Heav'nly Muse, shall not thy sacred vein  
Afford a present to the Infant God?  
Hast thou no verse, no hymn, or solemn strain,  
To welcome him to this his new abode,  
Now while the heav'n, by the Sun's team untrod,  
Hath took no print of the approaching light,  
And all the spangled host keep watch in squadrons bright?



See how from far upon the eastern road  
The star-led wizards haste with odours sweet:  
O run, prevent them with thy humble ode,  
And lay it lowly at his blessed feet;  
Have thou the honour first thy Lord to greet,  
And join thy voice unto the angel quire,  
From out his secret altar touched with hallowed fire.

—JOHN MILTON (1608–1674)

On the morning when we celebrate the scene known as the Nativity, we celebrate the day that Jesus Christ—the one and only begotten Son of the everlasting God—was born. It is the day Jesus left everything in heaven behind and came to earth to become one of us!



## *Our Savior's Humble Birth*


*Adapted from a sermon by the Reverend Alfred Barratt*

When Jesus Christ was born in Bethlehem he did not have a Christmas tree. The children born in those days were not as fortunate as children of today. The parents of Jesus were very poor. His house was not a palace, but a stable; his bed was not a pretty cot with a silk floss mattress, but a manger filled with hay.

And yet in spite of his poverty and humility he was the only begotten Son of God, who left his throne in heaven above and came to earth in human form to live among the sin-bound people of this world to teach them the love of God and to show them how much love God has for us.

On the day of his birth, the heavenly choir of angels gave a grand concert in Bethlehem. They sang their sky-born carols away up in the sky over the place where the lowly Child Jesus lay cradled in a humble cattle shed. One of the most beautiful songs the angels sang on that never-to-be-forgotten day was "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men."

It must have been grand for those shepherds who were "abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night" to hear such beautiful singing. But they did not

celebrate this wonderful event by gathering around a Christmas tree. They just left their sheep and went down into Bethlehem to seek the newborn King, and when they found him they worshiped him.

The idea of a Christmas tree was not thought of in those days. The first Christmas tree was originated 732 years after the birth of Jesus Christ. Perhaps the children who were looking anxiously and with joy and great expectation to see the Christmas tree may like to hear the legend of the first Christmas tree. Yet it may not merely be a legend, but history sending forth its radiant light through the dreary mists of traditions.

It is an old German story—that Saint Wilfred transformed the heathen Teuton worship in the forest in the Christmas ceremony. About 732 years after the birth of Jesus Christ, he took a band of priests with him and sought to convert the worshipers of Thor. It was on Christmas Eve, while they were fighting their way through the deep snow in the dense forest, that they came upon a savage tribe assembled under a thick oak tree, which was symbolic of the god of thunder, Thor. The old, white-haired priest of the tribe was about to offer as a sacrifice to Thor the young, beautiful son of the tribe's chief. When Wilfred saw it he rushed forward and warded off the arm that was about to slay the child. The tribesmen were all delighted at the saving of their favorite, and because of this act they very soon became converts to Christianity. Saint Wilfred then took his ax and started to cut down the old oak tree. As it was about to fall, lightning struck it and rended it into many pieces, and in its place there sprang up a little fir tree, green and sparkling. They carried this little fir tree to the chief captain's

hall, and set it in the middle of the room and round it they all made merry. It was about this first Christmas tree that the old, old story of Jesus and his love was told to the Teuton tribes, and in a short time they all became Christians.

Let us not forget that Christmas is the birthday of Jesus, and while we gather around the Christmas tree let us give our little hearts to Jesus as a Christmas present. He says today, "Give me your heart." If you will do this, he will give you in return a new sense of joy and peace that will not only shine through the Christmas season, but will remain with you throughout your earthly life. This would be a very fitting time to give your heart to Jesus, while the angels are singing again the Bethlehem anthem, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men." Will you do this for your own sake, and for Jesus' sake?

Jesus humbled himself to come to earth and be born in the humblest of circumstances so we could know the heavenly Father who sent him in the first place. There is only one thing we can give him in return for this act of love and generosity, and that's our hearts.



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