

The Surprise of Christmas

One of the great joys of Christmas is surprising those we love. We keep secrets, switch names on presents and exchange gifts surreptitiously. We have the cell phone ready when our children open their gifts; anticipating their gleeful surprise. Surprise is such an integral part of our Christmas celebration that we sometimes act surprised, even when we are not. I suggest Jesus Christ is the greatest surprise of Christmas.

Throughout the Scriptures, the Jews anticipated the Messiah, declared prophecies, and sang and prayed for the Messiah's coming. Ironically when the Messiah came, His entrance was such a surprise that the general population did not even notice. John the Baptist, Jesus' forerunner, when he saw Jesus, said, "Behold the Lamb of God!" Yet, a short time later he questioned whether he was the One. Despite all the Scriptural promises and the people's hopes, Jesus was simply not the kind of Messiah people were looking for.

Humanity has not changed. Many people today, even Christians, are filled with such unbelief. "If there is a good God, why is there such chaos in this world?" The history of the matter is God seldom works in the manner we think He should. If you are a devoted follower of Christ, you can attest how many surprises have come into your life, some of which are painfully surprising.

The manner in which Christ came into the world was profoundly surprising, if not altogether shocking. I would argue that the way He came into the world proves that human beings could have never designed such a plan. God's Christmas surprise birthed our salvation.

First, was His surprising entrance into the world. His birth was surrounded by an unlikely beginning—a virgin birth. His birth took place in an unlikely place; a cave in the rough, rustic, small town of Bethlehem. His birth was first announced to a group of unlikely heralds; shepherds, who were known for their far-fetched tales.

His birth and how it occurred is foundational to our Christian faith and doctrine. It teaches cardinal and lofty truths for our salvation. It also teaches us that we are not alone. We are significant to God. His surprising entrance teaches us Christ came to be among us and not above us; He came not to impress us, but to identify with us.

Secondly, was His surprising background. He had an ordinary name—Jesus, or Joshua. His appearance was probably far from movie-star quality. We would like to think of Jesus with strong features and a handsome, star-quality face. But in reality, we do not know anything about His physical appearance, except what was spoken through prophecy; describing a man far from winsomely handsome. "*He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to Him, nothing in His appearance that we should desire Him*" (Isaiah 53:2). In a culture where body-type is an idol and a multi-billion dollar business, it is wonderfully surprising that our Master's appearance was so common that he was probably just an unnoticed face in the crowd. Christ came not to intimidate us, but to invite "...all who are weary and burdened..." to come to Him and He "...will give you rest." For He continues, "*Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls*" (Matt. 11:28, 29).

He had a common name, was born in an unlikely place, and was raised in an insignificant town of 15 to 20 families—Nazareth. He characterizes His net worth with these words: "*Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.*" What a powerful lesson for someone, somewhere in this world, growing up in a refugee camp. Our Lord, the One who was the Craftsman at His Father's side in creation (Col. 1:16), who could turn water into wine and a few pieces of bread and fish into a feast, voluntarily chose poverty. "*For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich*" (2 Cor. 8:9).

Thirdly, was His surprising bunch of early followers. John the Baptist, Christ's advance man, was hardly a market-savvy P.R. person; he ate grasshoppers. His follow-up team was comprised of one impulsive fisherman and two others whose nicknames were "Sons of Thunder." He chose another guy who was a Jewish zealot and hated Rome. He chose yet another who was a tax-collecting pawn of the Roman government. His advance man was a social misfit and His follow-up team was comprised of uneducated men given to extremism. The good news is that He still calls frail, fickle, flawed people like you and me to follow Him.

Lastly, His greatest surprise. The one who came as God in the flesh, was the One whose birth was surrounded by an unlikely story—a virgin birth; born in an unlikely place—a cave in Bethlehem; His background was filled with commonness, from His name, appearance, neighborhood, and net-worth; and His bunch of followers—less than Ivy-leaguers, were ordinary at best. The culminating event of His life and ministry was most extraordinary by the sheer horror of it all—torture, execution, and death on a cross between two common thieves. Oh, and the greatest surprise of all: He rose again from the dead, defeating sin and death; achieving our salvation. An amazing surprise to celebrate, indeed. Merry Christmas!