

## INTRODUCTION

We love Nativity sets at our house. Over the years, Cindy and I have bought nativity sets from about a dozen different nations we visited. At our house, we don’t unpack them at Christmas and put them up after the holidays. Cindy displays them all year long instead.

When I was in China a few weeks ago, I looked in several for a Chinese Nativity set for Cindy. In a large Beijing store, I tried to explain to a clerk what I was looking for. He spoke a little English but the phrase “nativity set” had no meaning for him. The Chinese people love American music and one of their favorite songs is “Silent Night” so I began to sing the words right there in the store. I got through “Silent Night, Holy Night, all is calm; all is bright ...” when his eyes lit up with recognition and he smiled, nodded and led me to a section of the store selling Christmas supplies. There were Santas galore, lights and ornaments—but not a single Nativity scene to be found anywhere. In fact, there was not anything even hinting Christmas was about the birth of Jesus. At that moment I understood the Chinese have learned from Americans that Christmas is more about Santa than it is about a Savior.

The word *nativity* is derived from the Latin word for “birth.” A nativity exhibit may also be called a *creche* (pronounced kresh) from the French word for crib. These sets can be made of wood, ivory, glass or clay. Cindy even has a tiny nativity carved inside a stone about the size of an egg.

It is generally agreed Nativity scenes became popular in 1277 when St. Francis of Assisi staged an outdoor live nativity scene. Soon artisans started creating three-dimensional sets. By the 18<sup>th</sup> century, some Italian nativity scenes (called *presepios*) were so ornate they had dozens of structures recreating the entire village of Bethlehem. Some of these are worth millions of dollars and one of the best examples is on permanent display in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City.

It is possible to love nativity sets and to display them in your home every Christmas without ever stopping to understand what God was doing on the first Christmas. This morning, I want us to recreate the Nativity scene. As we build in each element in this beautiful scene, we’ll stop and examine it and learn a personal lesson about God’s Nativity activity.

Let’s create the background by reading Luke 2:4-7:

“So Joseph 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 strips of cloth and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.”

We are going to look at ten elements making up the Nativity, and we’ll learn a personal lesson from each of these parts of the overall picture.

## 1. Mary - the impossible happens when you surrender to God

Nine months before the birth of Jesus, God launched His nativity activity by sending Gabriel to a young teenager named Mary who lived in Nazareth. Gabriel announced God wanted her to be the mother of His Son. Can you imagine the fear and the confusion that must have filled Mary's heart? When she figured out exactly what Gabriel was saying, Mary pointed out the obvious problem with this idea. In Luke 1:34-38 we read: "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God." ... "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Gabriel told Mary *nothing* is impossible for God. In faith Mary submitted to God and gave her permission to proceed with the plan. God never forces His plan on anyone. Mary surrendered her will to God when she said, "May it be as you have said."

**In every spiritual transaction there are three important forces at work:**

1. **The Word of God** (what God promised Mary)
2. **The Will of the Person** (Mary chose to follow God's plan)
3. **The Work of the Holy Spirit** (the Holy Spirit came upon Mary and she became pregnant)

Our role in the process is to choose God's will for our lives. That's what happens when you receive Jesus as your Savior. God's Word offers us eternal life. Then, we submit our will to God's, and then the Holy Spirit brings about regeneration in our lives. Like Mary, we must *all* say to God, "I am the Lord's servant, may it be to me as you have said." When you do that, you don't have to worry about *how* God will accomplish it, because that's His job, not ours!

## 2. JOSEPH: It's hard to trust what God is doing in the lives of those we love

Joseph has been called the forgotten man of the Christmas story. The Bible doesn't record one single word he uttered. He must have been the strong, silent type, because it took a great deal of strength for him to follow his part in the birth of the Messiah.

I wonder how Mary broke the news to him? Maybe they were talking about the wedding plans and she said, "Joseph, I'm so excited Rachel is coming to the wedding. I just heard my cousin Elizabeth is pregnant, in her old age, can you imagine that? And by the way, I'm pregnant, too, and I wonder if we ought to serve beef or fish at the reception."

"Whoa! What did you just say?" asked Joseph.

"Oh, I was just wondering if we should have beef or fish."

"No about the other part—about you being pregnant."

"That's right, an angel came to see me and told me I would have God's son and the next thing I know, I'm pregnant—but don't worry, Joseph. I'm still a virgin."

Do you think Joseph's first reaction was, "That's wonderful, darling! Let's pause and praise God for His wonderful plan for your life!" Hardly. I know a few carpenters, and that's not how most men react to that kind of news. He probably thought, "I know *I'm* not the father. Don't hand me

that baloney about still being a virgin. And the Holy Spirit? Come on—what kind of idiot do you think I am?”

We know from the Bible Joseph was ready to divorce her, but God had other plans. In Matthew 1:18-21 we read:

“Because Joseph, her husband, was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus because he will save his people from their sins.”

Joseph went along with God’s plan, even though it affected his wife more than him. He was willing to endure all the ridicule and skepticism he would hear from all his “friends.” Why? Because God was doing something in the life of the one he loved—Mary. What a tough lesson for us. How do you react when God is telling your mate something He isn’t telling you? God doesn’t always send some angel to straighten out the misunderstanding. It takes an extra measure of grace and obedience to trust that God knows what He is doing in the life of someone you love.

### **3. THE STABLE: As bad as your life may be, you can still identify with Jesus**

If God were really in control, wouldn’t you think He would have arranged for Jesus to be born in a palace? Instead, we all know there was no room in the inn. The Bible never says there was a stable, just a manger. But wherever there’s a manger there are animals, and that means some kind of barn. But instead of the wooden hut, the barn was most likely a shallow limestone cave. Farmers herded their animals into these caves and put barriers across the openings. If you visit Bethlehem and go down to where tradition says Jesus was born, you’ll find yourself looking into a grotto or shallow cave. A huge, ornate church has been built over the grotto, of course. But you can still go out into the shepherds’ fields around Bethlehem and find dozens of examples of these caves. They are still used to keep animals sheltered. Why was Jesus born in what we would call a barn? So all of us would never be tempted to think He was some aristocratic snob who was born with a silver spoon in His mouth. Most of us in this room were born into a hospital. Probably none of us can claim to have been born in such poor harsh conditions awaiting the Lord Jesus when He was born. Bill Hybels wrote:

“God made a strategic decision not to shelter His son from the harsh realities of this life. God wanted His son to experience life in its blue collar boldness. Jesus’ first breath of air burned with the odor of animal waste. The first noises he would hear would be the grunts of livestock. Jesus’ first clothing would be made of dust cloths, or the equivalent of greasy rags. From day one God the father determined not to shelter His son from the rude and crude realities of life on Planet Earth.

Whatever bad business life hands you, Jesus has already been there. He was a refugee as an infant, fleeing to Egypt with his family. He worked in construction for 30 years. He understands

poverty, discrimination and rejection. He was ridiculed every day of His short ministry. At the time of His arrest, His closest friends abandoned Him.

Friends, whatever you experience in this life that drives you to your breaking point and causes you to cry out, “Nobody understands,” look at the stable and be reminded that Jesus understands. He’s been right there. He can identify with you no matter what you’re going through

#### **4. THE MANGER: God’ presence changes the simple into the supernatural**

We read earlier when Jesus was born, Mary laid Him in a manger. Because of the Christmas story, some people think a manger is a nice little bassinet with a soft bottom and frilly ribbons. A manger was nothing but a common feed trough for cattle and other livestock. It was a crudely constructed piece of barn furniture—ordinary in every way. In nativity scenes, the manger often appears as a little box that looks inviting and warm - a good place to lay a baby. Instead, it was probably long, narrow, and smelly from the sloppy animals that had eaten out of it.

What’s the point? Today, we sing songs about the manger. There is a manger square in Bethlehem! Suddenly, a simple piece of furniture has been transformed into an icon! Why? Because we believe when Jesus was in the manger, it was God in the flesh. He gave it dignity, and now almost everyone knows and used the word “manger” at Christmas time. Only God can change something as simple and ordinary as a feed trough into a beautiful supernatural symbol.

The manger is a wonderful symbol of what can happen to an ordinary man or woman when Jesus Christ lives in them. It’s what’s happened to thousands of us ordinary people - God’s presence has made our lives extraordinary. Just as feed can become a cradle for a king, a very average person can become exceptional when they receive Jesus Christ.

#### **5. JESUS: God became like you so that you can become like Him**

At the center of it all is the baby Jesus. What a journey He took to make it to Bethlehem! He was co-equal and co-exists with the Father in heaven. He has always been the second Person of the Godhead. And He was willing to lay aside the unimaginable glory of heaven to become one of us. I like the way Paul describes it in II Corinthians 8:9: “For you know the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.” God took on human flesh so He could communicate with us to tell us God loves us.

Once there was a family living on a mountain above a little village. The mother and children always attended the Christmas Eve service in the little church down below, but the husband didn’t have much use for all that religious stuff. One cold, snowy Christmas Eve, the wife bundled the kids up and they traveled down to the church. The man stayed behind. Suddenly he heard a noise and went to investigate. The icy snow had disoriented a bird and it had flown into the window. It was dazed and fluttering in the snow. The man had pity on the little bird, and he wanted to rescue it to warm it up inside and feed it before he would set it free. But when he approached the wounded bird to help it, it was frightened and fluttered away. He kept trying to catch it, even using a soothing voice to say, “I’m not going to *hurt* you, I just want to *help* you

little bird. Why can’t you understand that?” After several futile attempts, he realized it was hopeless. The bird wouldn’t let him get near. He stopped to analyze the problem. He had a thought, “The only way I could communicate with the bird would be for me to become a bird like him!” At that moment, the sounds of Christmas carols could be heard drifting up from the church below. “Joy to the World, the Lord is come!” Suddenly, the man realized why Jesus came to earth. God needed a way to tell us He wanted to *help* us not *hurt* us, so He became one of us. At that moment the man knelt in the snow and became a child of God. You see, Jesus became one of us, so we can become like Him! He also took on human flesh so He could die for our sins. It’s not the baby in the manger who saves us—it’s the Savior on the cross and the risen Lord who conquered death for us!

## **6. ANIMALS: All of creation recognizes Jesus as Lord**

I’ve had lots of lousy ideas as a pastor, and in one church in Alabama, I challenged the folks to put on a live, outdoor nativity scene. Everybody thought it was a great idea, but when it came time to put it on, I had to do all the work to set it up. My veterinarian friend, Charlie rounded up a couple of sheep, a calf, and a donkey. A man who owned a sawmill brought some rough timber and threw up a wobbly looking stable. Finding costumes wasn’t hard, because every Baptist church has a closet somewhere with old costumes from previous Christmas programs. Everything went great except for the sheep. They aren’t the gentle, sweet animals some people think. I had to literally chase them and tackle them to get them into the trailer to take to the church. Once there, they wouldn’t stay in the little corral we built—they kept wandering off. I tied them to a stake with a rope, and they pulled until they were almost choking themselves to death—not a very peaceful scene. I called Charlie and he came and said, “Yep, they’re a mite skittish. I’ll give ‘em a sedative shot.” That worked. Instead of pulling on the ropes, the two sheep stood there like statues with a glazed look on their eyes, and a funny smile on their faces. He did that each evening, and by the end of the week, the sheep were almost running to meet him!

I don’t know how the animals acted the night Jesus was born. I like the animals in a nativity scene, because to me, it speaks of how Jesus is Lord over all of nature, including animals. I think it’s important animals were some of the first to witness the birth of the Savior. We read in Psalm 8:8-6: “You put everything under his feet: all flocks and herds, and the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, all that swim the paths of the seas.” Jesus had such sway over animals; He could make hundreds of fish swim into a net. He could ride a colt into Jerusalem that had never been ridden before and those of you who know horses know that’s not easy! It’s like the ranch advertising horse rides I read about. The ad said they had big horses for big people, little horses for little people, slow horses for slow people, and for people who’d never ridden before they had horses that had never been ridden! Jesus easily rode the unbroken colt into Jerusalem.

I think animals have an instinctive sense God is taking care of them. Animals don’t spend all their lives knowing they are going to die, like we do. They don’t have a need to seek God because, unlike us, they’ve never been lost. God cares so much for animals we learned last week He attends the funeral of every sparrow that dies. So, let’s rejoice that animals could witness Jesus’ birth, because Jesus is Lord over animals as well.

## **7. ANGELS: Good News! You don’t have to be afraid!**

I won’t go into details here about the fascinating topic of angels. If you are interested in the subject, I suggest you get my book on angels available in our bookstore. Primarily, notice the angels came to make a wonderful announcement. We find it in Luke 2:10-11: “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.” There is a great deal of fear in our lives today. We are more afraid this Christmas than we were last Christmas. What do you think may happen next year? We don’t know—but God does and He has told us not to worry, to trust Him. That’s the wonderful message of Christmas we emphasize repeatedly each season: Fear not! Don’t be afraid. That’s precisely the message God has for some of you.

## **8. SHEPHERDS: God wants you to share the story of Jesus with everyone**

God chose shepherds as the first Christmas audience. They were the social and religious outcasts in Jewish society. They were illiterate, dirty workmen looked down upon by the Pharisees and scribes. God has such a wonderful sense of humor. He intentionally sent the angels to these smelly shepherds rather than to King Herod or the High Priest. When the shepherds found the baby Jesus in the manger, they left and couldn’t keep silent about what they had seen and experienced. Luke 2:17 says: “When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about his child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.” Our job is to do the same thing. Once you have encountered Jesus and have had your life changed, it’s impossible to keep it to yourself. Over the next couple of days, you will probably be giving a few gifts away to those you love. You love them, so you are happy to give them a Christmas gift. The most valuable, loving gift you could ever give to someone is to tell them about Jesus.

## **9. THE STAR: When you honestly seek God He will guide you to Jesus**

Now, even though we have the wise men in most nativity scenes, the scripture makes it clear their visit happened some time *after* Jesus’ birth—but, for the sake of our Nativity scene, let’s talk about them anyway. God provided a star as a supernatural light to guide these wise men. Some people speculate the star was the alignment of Saturn and Jupiter that occurred in 7 B.C. or Halley’s comet was calculated to have appeared in 4 B.C., the year Jesus was born. But I believe it was a unique light God provided for the event. Look at Matthew 2:9-10: “The star they had seen in the East went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star they were overjoyed.” This was a supernatural light, not some natural phenomenon. God went to extraordinary lengths to direct them right to Bethlehem and they were faithful enough to follow.

I’m sure we have some seekers here today. You aren’t so sure about all this “Jesus business.” You hear others and myself talking about having a personal relationship with Jesus and you think it sounds spooky. If you are an honest seeker, I have some good news for you. Chances are, God has already placed somebody in your circle of relationships who will be a spiritual “travel guide” for you. You may be thinking, “Yeah, if God would place some kind of laser light in the sky, I’d

believe!" Your guide may be a friend whose life shines for Jesus—that could be the star God has provided for you. This Christmas, why don't you pay some attention to God's star?

Many of you here today are believers, and God may want to use you as the guiding light for people you know who haven't discovered the joy of knowing Christ. Will you be faithful to let your light shine? There are some people you know who are living in darkness, and they desperately need your light. I love the promise of God given to Daniel in Daniel 12:3. God says, "Those who lead many to righteousness shall shine like the stars for ever and ever." A little boy once looked up into a starlit sky and said stars were just holes in the floor of heaven to let some light shine through. You are a child of God, and He wants to let His light shine through you.

### **10. MAGI: You are wise to bow and offer Jesus your finest gifts**

This is the last addition to our nativity scene. Now, even though the song says, "We three kings," we don't know how many wise men were there. There could have been two or twenty. The word for magi is just plural. I read recently they were late because they were men. This same article said it would have been totally different if there had been wise women instead of wise men. If they had been wise women, they would have asked directions, arrived on time, helped deliver the baby, cleaned the stable, made a casserole, brought practical gifts and there would be peace on earth today. I may agree with all those except the last one!

Even though their journey took months or perhaps years, they didn't quit. They kept on following the star until they came to Jesus. Wise people do that—they keep honestly seeking God until He leads them to Jesus. In addition to seeking Jesus, they were willing to worship Him. Matthew 2:11 says, "They saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh."

For these Eastern officials to bow before a child was an amazing sight. They were probably more accustomed to being bowed *to* than to bowing to others. But they were acknowledging Jesus was the real King—the true Lord. Then as the Little Drummer Boy tells us, "their finest gifts to bring, pa rumpa pum pum." That's the Christmas message God is trying to deliver to some of you today. You know about Jesus, and you may even have encountered Him. But have you humbled yourself, and bowed before Him as your king? Have you offered Him the best of your time, your talents, and your treasure? You are truly a wise man or woman if you will do that.

### **CONCLUSION**

Take a moment and look at the nativity picture. Try to go back in your mind to Bethlehem to that night almost 2,000 years ago. Focus on God's Nativity activity. He was up to something that would change the course of human history more than any other single event!

2001 was a tough year. We have seen the depth of the sin and depravity in the hearts of those without Christ. We need to visit the nativity scene to find the inner strength and peace it offers. We sometimes are guilty of singing Christmas songs without really paying attention to the

words. As you focus on the nativity activity of God, listen to these words written over 100 years ago:

It came upon a midnight clear, that glorious song of old,  
From Angels bending near the earth, to touch their harps of gold;  
"Peace on the earth, good will to men," From heaven's all gracious King.  
The world in solemn still lay, to hear the angels sing.

(You know those words, but pay attention to the next two verses)

Yet with the woes of sin and strife the world has suffered long,  
Beneath the angel strains have rolled two thousand years of wrong;  
And man at war, at war with man, hears not the love song which they bring;  
O hush the noise, you men of strife, And hear the angels sing!

All you beneath life's crushing load, whose forms are bending low,  
Who toil along the climbing way with painful steps and slow, Look now!  
For glad and golden hours come swiftly on the wing;  
O rest beside the weary road, and hear the angels sing!



## OUTLINE

1. *MARY*: The impossible happens when you surrender to God
2. *JOSEPH*: It’s hard to trust what God is doing in the lives of those we love
3. *THE STABLE*: As bad as your life may be, you can still identify with Jesus
4. *THE MANGER*: God’s presence changes the simple into the supernatural
5. *JESUS*: God became like you so you can become like Him
6. *ANIMALS*: All of creation recognizes Jesus as Lord
7. *ANGELS*: Good News! You don’t have to be afraid!
8. *SHEPHERDS*: God wants you to share the story of Jesus with everyone
9. *THE STAR*: When you honestly seek God, He will guide you to Jesus
10. *MAGI*: You are wise to bow and offer Jesus your finest gifts



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For the Joy...  
Pastor David Dykes