



THE LIFE AND TIMES

of

JESUS OF NAZARETH

Luke 2:1-52

A Carpenter's Son in a Cradle

Bethlehem and the First Greetings

Marvel that God works through ordinary families and humble places to fulfill His promises



We saw in John 1 that before Bethlehem and before the babe was laid in swaddling clothes the eternal Word was with God and was God. That theological foundation matters, because without it we will almost certainly diminish Jesus. We may sentimentalize or admire Him, but we will not worship Him rightly. So as we turn now to the birth and early life of Jesus, we must keep two things before us at once:

Real history and eternal significance. This is not a sentimental legend or a religious myth. Nor is it simply the story of an unusual child. It is the eternal Son, the Word, entering the world through ordinary human circumstances to fulfill covenant promises and accomplish redemption.





We'll trace the early years of Jesus from Bethlehem to Nazareth, pausing at the temple with Simeon and Anna, then with the wise men, the flight into Egypt, Herod's rage, and finally the twelve-year-old Jesus in Jerusalem. If John 1 gives us the eternal horizon, Luke and Matthew now give us the historical point of view. From this perspective we will see something very important:

God works through ordinary families, humble places, political upheaval, seasons when it seems there is no room for us, painful journeys, and small towns. Undergirding it all is a fixed devotion to the Father's business. That is true not only in redemptive history. It often instructs and steadies us in our own lives as well.





Luke begins with the world stage. “And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered/taxed.” (Luke 2:1, NKJV). Caesar Augustus was the first Roman emperor, the adopted son of Julius Caesar, and the man who consolidated Roman power after a long season of civil war. His reign brought what historians call the Pax Romana, a relative peace across much of the empire, systems of taxation, standards for administration, along with roads, and infrastructure - all that helped the spread of the gospel.

But Luke is careful to show us something deeper. However exalted Caesar may have appeared, he was not directing history. God was. Augustus issued a decree for imperial purposes. God used that decree for redemptive and eternal purposes.

The emperor likely imagined he was extending Roman control, improving taxation, and reinforcing political order. He did not know he was serving Micah 5:2. He did not know that the true King, the “one whose goings forth are from of old, from everlasting”, would be born in Bethlehem according to prophecy. Yet the Lord, who turns the king’s heart wherever He wishes, used the machinery of empire to bring Joseph and Mary to precisely the place required by Scripture. This is a recurring lesson in the Bible. Rulers make real decisions, yet none of them operate outside the authority of God. God is not reacting to history. He is directing it.





That is no small comfort for believers today. We may feel frustrated or fearful over taxes, deficits, wars, rumors of wars, and increasingly authoritarian leaders. But the God who governed Augustus is no less sovereign now. He is still ruling over history and still working out His eternal purposes. There is no ruler - no matter how powerful, how arrogant, or how submissive to the interest of elites - that operates except God has willed it. That is where peace is found.

Luke tells us Joseph “also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David” (Luke 2:4, NKJV). Nazareth to Bethlehem was roughly ninety miles, likely a journey of four to seven days depending on pace, terrain, weather, and Mary’s condition.

For a young woman near the end of pregnancy, this was not easy. It was exhausting, and it must have been especially risky for both mother and child. Uneven paths, uncertain lodging, and the strain of Roman tax demands hanging over their heads. Yet God’s providence was no less active because the road was hard.





Bethlehem itself was small, a village more than a city, perhaps only a few hundred people. Yet it carried theological weight. It was David's town. It was also called the house of bread. And in the providence of God the One who would later declare Himself the Bread of Life entered the world there. Human beings expect greatness to appear in the obvious places: in capitals, courts, and centers of power. God brings His Son into the world through a village, through a poor family, and through a setting stripped of human grandeur. A Son who will, in 33 years, impact Rome's itself.

“So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn” (Luke 2:6-7, NKJV).

The “inn” likely refers not to a commercial hotel as we would know such, but a guest room. The point remains: there was no suitable place available. The Child is laid in a manger, probably a feeding trough, likely in the context of a cave-stable or the lower section of a family dwelling where animals were kept.

This poverty is not accidental. It is revelatory. Christ’s humiliation begins not merely at the cross, but at His birth. From the beginning His coming exposes the emptiness of worldly values. Men assume greatness must announce itself in splendor. God reveals greatness veiled in meekness. Men prize appearance, access, and status. God gives His Son to the world in a manger.





Luke's details the matter historically and theologically. Jesus was not a phantom. He was not merely an appearance. He was born. He was wrapped. He was laid somewhere. That matters because it ties directly to John 1:14: "the Word became flesh." The eternal Son did not hover near humanity or merely seem human. He entered a real world under real rulers, into a real family, in a real place. These details oppose every attempt to dissolve Christianity into mere symbol or detached spirituality. The eternal Word became flesh.

Our study now shifts to the first public announcements. “Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night” (Luke 2:8, NKJV).

We should not rush past the significance of the shepherds. These were ordinary working men of the fields who carried responsibility day and night. They were not social elites. They were not seated among Jerusalem’s scholars. They were not in the palace. They were doing necessary work in the dark hours when most others were asleep.





In many families, tending sheep was the responsibility of the younger boys, much like David in the Old Testament. The shepherds near Bethlehem may have been more specialized workers, possibly caring for flocks used in Temple sacrifice. Bethlehem lay only a few miles from Jerusalem, and fields in that region were closely connected to the religious life of the nation. That means these shepherds may not have been young teens but responsible laborers entrusted with an important temple task.

But we do know that to them comes the heavenly announcement. “And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid” (Luke 2:9, NKJV). That fear is natural. When heaven intrudes into ordinary life, the first instinct is often to prefer the familiar comfort of life without divine interruption, because God’s presence brings holy claims upon us.

The angel says: “Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people” (Luke 2:10, NKJV).





Then comes the message itself: “For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:11, NKJV). That is no ordinary birth announcement. Savior! Christ! Lord! In one sentence the angel joins redemption, kingship, and divine authority.

Then suddenly there is a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: “Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!” (Luke 2:14, NKJV).

We take notice of the announcement: “ toward men!” (Luke 2:14) This angelic announcement is not to a limited group of people - but to the earth and to all of mankind!

The shepherds go quickly, find the Child just as they were told, and then they make widely known what had been spoken to them concerning Him - they were witnesses! It is remarkable that the first human witnesses to the Messiah's birth are shepherds. Men who were hard-working but socially unimpressive.

They become heralds of the greatest news the world had ever heard. This fits beautifully with what we saw in John 1. God raises witnesses to the Light, and those witnesses are often ordinary people rather than religious celebrities. God often entrusts His message not to the impressive, but to people the world often hardly notices.





That should encourage every believer. You do not need public stature to speak faithfully of Christ. The shepherds went back to their ordinary lives, but they did not go back as ordinary men. They returned “glorifying and praising God” (Luke 2:20, NKJV). True encounter with Christ does not remove us from ordinary life. Often it sends us back into it as a witness.

Simeon and Anna are often passed over in the retellings of the Christmas story. One often races from the manger to the wise men and then moves on. Luke does not. He brings us to the temple, and there he gives us two elderly saints whose words are among the richest in the infancy narratives.





Jesus is circumcised on the eighth day and named according to the angel's instruction (Matthew 1:21, NKJV). When the days of purification according to the law of Moses were completed, Mary and Joseph bring Him to Jerusalem "to present Him to the Lord" (Luke 2:22, NKJV). They also offer "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons" (Luke 2:24, NKJV), which was the offering permitted for those who could not afford a lamb (Leviticus 12:8).

That detail is small, but important. It reminds us again that Jesus was born into simplicity. We would likely say today that the holy family was working class.

And now we meet Simeon. Luke describes him as “just and devout, waiting for the Consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him” (Luke 2:25, NKJV). This language echoes Isaiah’s promises of comfort and restoration, especially Isaiah 40:1–2 and Isaiah 49:13, where God speaks of comforting His people and redeeming Jerusalem. Simeon is not merely a pious old man waiting for a private spiritual experience. He is a representative of faithful Israel longing for the fulfillment of God’s covenant promises.





The Spirit had revealed to him that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. So he comes by the Spirit into the temple, and when he sees the Child Jesus he takes Him up in his arms and blesses God. What follows is one of the great speeches in Luke's Gospel:

“Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, according to Your word; for my eyes have seen Your salvation which You have prepared before the face of all peoples, a light to bring revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel” (Luke 2:29–32, NKJV).





Simeon is primarily quoting Isaiah: “Indeed He says, ‘It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also give You as a light to the Gentiles, that You should be My salvation to the ends of the earth.’ ” Isaiah 49:6 And he also makes strong allusions to Isaiah 52:10, 42:6, 46:13, and 40:5.

In short, Simeon knew his bible well - he knew the full biblical picture. And he was waiting for the fulfillment of the arrival of God’s promised Messiah. He is praying the Bible back to God. And he appears to be one of the few who did not think Messiah would arrive with political authority, i.e., a David like warrior King.

These words deserve attention. Simeon sees in this Child not merely Israel's comfort, but the salvation of God prepared "before the face of all peoples." Jesus is both "a light to bring revelation to the Gentiles" and "the glory of Your people Israel."





This is crucial. Jesus did not come in a way that bypassed Israel. He came through Israel, to Israel, as Israel's Messiah. Yet from the beginning His mission had global implications. The blessing promised to Abraham (Genesis 12:3; 15:5–6; 17:4–8) was always meant to reach the nations. Simeon understands what many fail to grasp: the Messiah comes through and to Israel, but not to Israel alone.

Luke tells us that Joseph and Mary marveled at those things spoken of Him. Then Simeon blesses them and says to Mary,

“Behold, this Child is destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign which will be spoken against” (Luke 2:34, NKJV).





Simeon's words in Luke 2:34 are not a quotation from a single Old Testament passage but a synthesis of several prophetic themes, especially from Isaiah. The prophet had spoken of the coming Messiah as both a sanctuary and a stone of stumbling to Israel (Isaiah 8:14–15), a sure cornerstone laid in Zion whom some would trust and others would reject (Isaiah 28:16), and a light whose coming would expose hearts and divide responses (Isaiah 42:6; 49:6).

In other words, Isaiah had already prepared God's people to expect that the Messiah would not be received uniformly. His arrival would bring salvation to a remnant and stumbling to others; some rising to a new life of faith and others falling deeper into unbelief and self righteousness.

Then Simeon adds the painful word to Mary: “Yes, a sword will pierce through your own soul also” (Luke 2:35, NKJV). The image is severe. It points to deep sorrow, not a passing sadness. Mary will not remain a distant observer of her Son’s ministry. She will suffer in seeing Him opposed, rejected, and crucified. The shadow of the cross reaches back even into the temple courts of His infancy.





Now Anna appears. “Now there was one, Anna, a prophetess” (Luke 2:36, NKJV).

Luke tells us that she was advanced in years, a widow for decades, and that she “did not depart from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day” (Luke 2:37, NKJV). Here is another picture of quiet, persevering faithfulness. Not public prominence. Not institutional power. Not celebrity religion. An old woman of prayer, waiting on God, living in hope, and serving as a faithful witness to the Light.

“And coming in that instant she gave thanks to the Lord, and spoke of Him to all those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem” (Luke 2:38, NKJV). She sees, she thanks, and she witnesses. Simeon and Anna together represent the faithful remnant in Israel. They are watching, praying, hoping, and when the Messiah comes - they recognize Him.





Many in Israel at that time were expecting a political deliverer, someone who would overthrow Roman authority and restore national independence. Their hopes were shaped by oppression and longing for freedom. But Simeon and Anna recognized something deeper, something eternal..

They were not merely waiting for political relief. They were waiting for redemption from sin and the fulfillment of God's promises. That difference explains why so many religious leaders missed Jesus. Their expectations were earthly. Simeon and Anna's hope was spiritual - it was eternal.

The temple was full of religious activity, yet only a few recognized what was before them. That is a warning. It is possible to be surrounded by a busy religious life and still miss Christ. It is possible to stand in the right church building, know the right customs, hear the right messages, and yet fail to see the Lord's salvation. Simeon and Anna saw Him because they were waiting in faith.



Matthew now brings visitors from another direction, from a very different social and educational background. “Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem” (Matthew 2:1, NKJV).

These “wise men” are the magoi, a term that can refer to scholars, political advisors, astronomers from the East. Their exact origin is not named, but Persia and Babylon are the most likely locations.





Persia, corresponding broadly to modern Iran, had a long tradition of magi connected with priestly and astronomical learning. Babylon, in modern Iraq, had centuries of astronomical observations and also a significant Jewish population dating back to the exile. Either location would place these men within an eastern intellectual world that watched the heavens closely and, in some cases, may have had exposure to Jewish messianic expectation. Daniel's long ministry in Babylon may well have also left traces. In either case, these men were not local shepherds from nearby hills. They were not simple elderly folk. They were scholars who came from far away, perhaps traveling a thousand miles. Their journey was costly, deliberate, and long.

They arrive in Jerusalem asking, “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him” (Matthew 2:2, NKJV). This is astonishing. Gentiles come seeking the King while many in Israel remain unaware or indifferent. A theme begins to emerge: nations are beginning to stream to the Light.

Herod, of course, is troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. He gathers the chief priests and scribes, and they correctly identify the birthplace from Micah 5:2, Bethlehem.





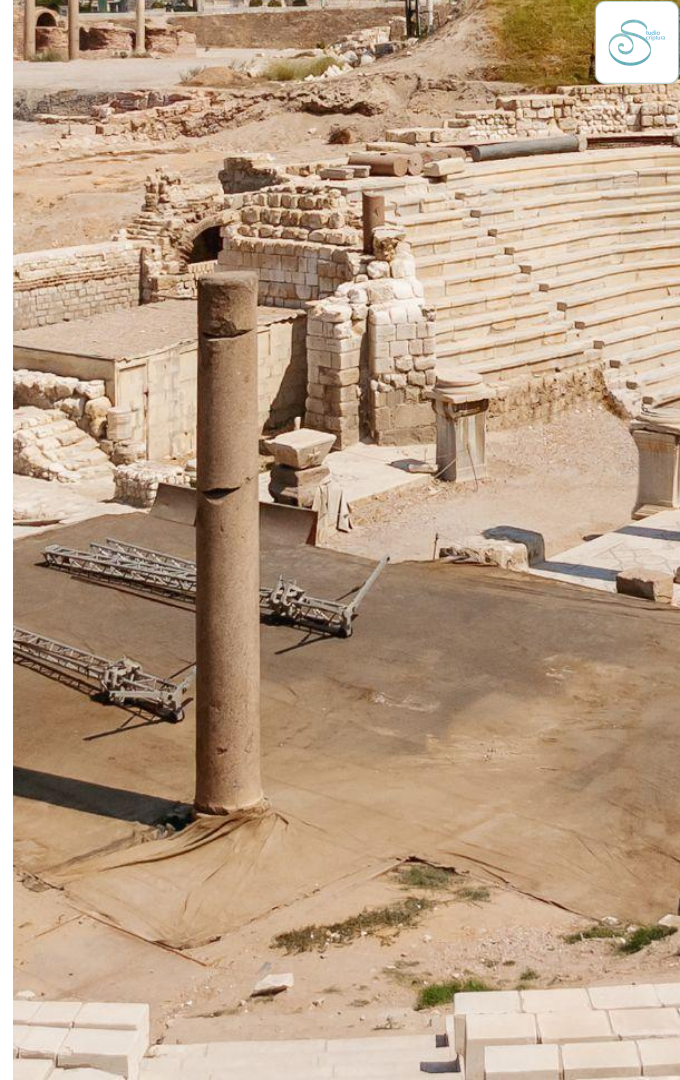
The star leads the wise men to the house where the young Child is. Matthew tells us that they “fell down and worshiped Him” (Matthew 2:11, NKJV), and they offered gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Scripture does not explicitly assign symbolic meanings to the gifts, so we should be cautious not to become overly fanciful. Still, Christians have long seen fitting significance in them: gold suitable for a king, frankincense associated with priestly worship, myrrh suggestive of suffering and burial. At minimum, the gifts are costly and honorific. These men do not come as curious observers. They come to admire and to worship.

There is also a geopolitical and theological lesson here for us today. Persia and Babylon, lands often associated with opposition, spiritual darkness, and terrorism are shown here as places from where seekers come to Christ.

That should shape how we think. The Lord is not bound by our fears, our cultural stereotypes, nor the prevailing propaganda. He has His people in every place and He is able to draw worshipers from every nation. Rather than condemn or bomb, let us pray that God sends laborers/witnesses into these countries with the Gospel of Christ.



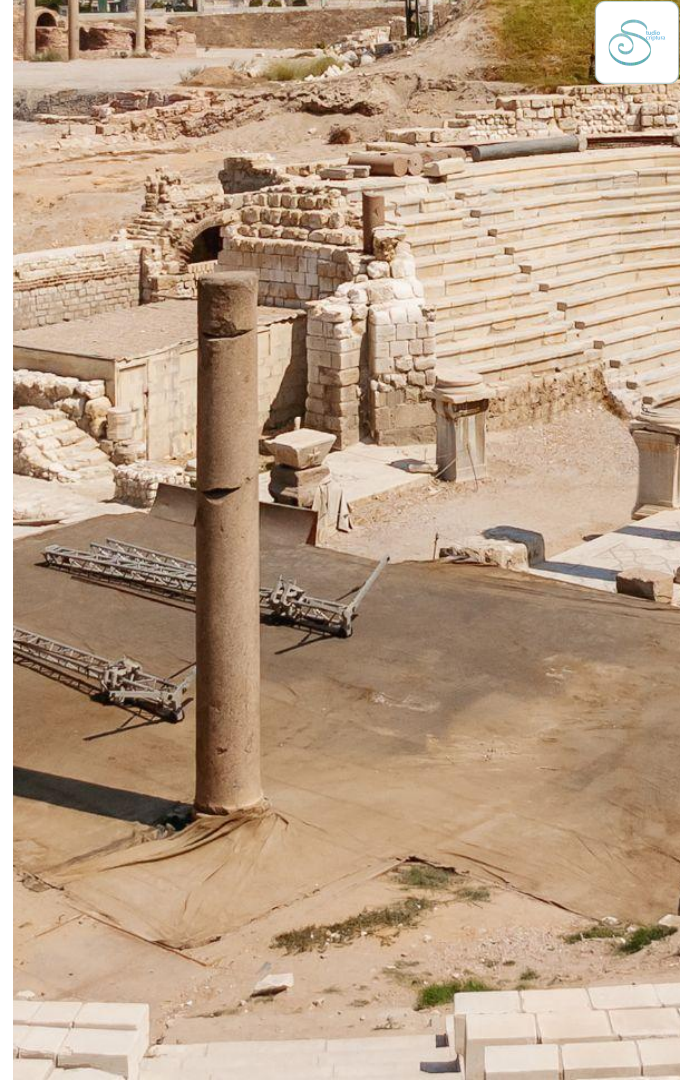
After the wise men depart, an angel of the Lord appears to Joseph in a dream and commands him to flee to Egypt, because Herod is about to seek the young Child to destroy Him. Joseph rises, takes the Child and His mother by night, and departs. Matthew then tells us this fulfills Hosea 11:1: “Out of Egypt I called My Son.”





Egypt had long served as a place of refuge at various points in biblical history. There were also Jewish communities there, especially in Alexandria. So this was not a random destination. It was a place of relative safety and existing Jewish presence. The journey itself, however, was still demanding. It likely covered about 500 hundred miles and may have taken several weeks.

This passage also raises the question of dreams. Joseph receives divine guidance in dreams more than once in Jesus' infancy narratives. We see dreams elsewhere in Scripture as well: Jacob, Pharaoh, Nebuchadnezzar, Daniel, the wise men. In the biblical world, before the completion of the canon, dreams were one of the ways God sometimes communicated.



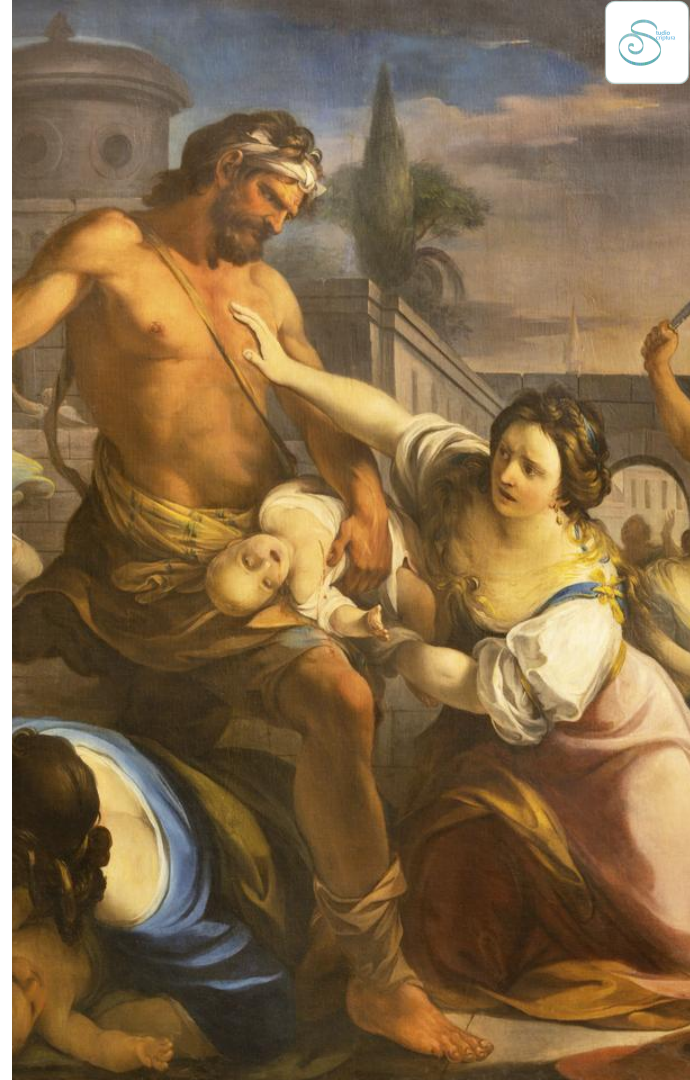


Today we must say two things: First, Scripture is our final authority. God has given us His completed written Word, and all claims of guidance must be tested by it. Scripture remains the final authority, and no dream or impression ever overrules the written Word of God. Second, it is not necessary to become dismissive about dreams.

Modern psychology recognizes that sleep and dreaming often involve the processing of memory, emotion, unresolved tension, and patterns of thought. People sometimes wake with greater clarity after “sleeping on” a matter. That is not the same as equating dreams with divine revelation. But it does mean we need not speak foolishly about them. Believers should measure everything by Scripture, ask God for wisdom, and resist both superstition and cynicism.

Herod's Fury and the Slaughter of the Innocents - Matthew 2:16-18

Matthew then records one of the darkest scenes in the infancy narratives. Herod the Great, the Roman-appointed ruler of Judea, realizing he had been deceived by the wise men, becomes furious and orders the death of all the male children in Bethlehem and its districts who were two years old and under, according to the time he had carefully determined from the magi.





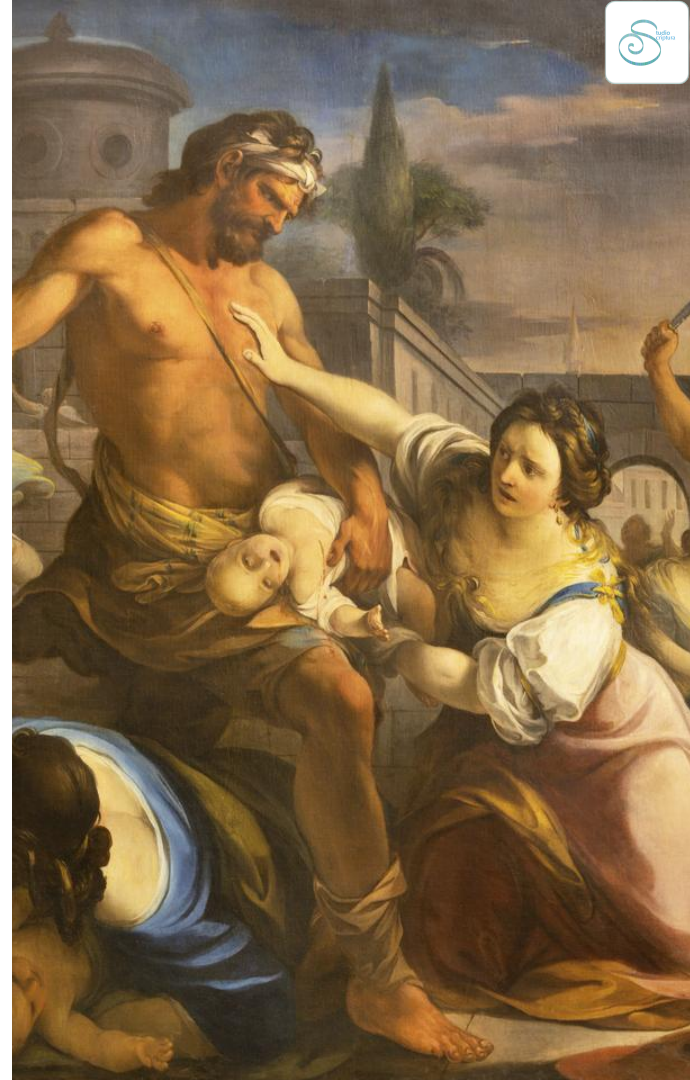
We do and should recoil at this. There is no virtue in becoming desensitized to bloodshed. Herod's act is monstrous. Matthew connects it to Jeremiah 31:15: Rachel weeping for her children. Bethlehem's joy is pierced by grief.

This cruelty also fits what we know of Herod the Great. He was politically astute, architecturally ambitious, and deeply paranoid. He executed multiple members of his own family when he perceived threats to his throne.

When sinful rulers feel threatened, power often turns cruel very quickly. That was true then. It unfortunately remains true today.

And yes, this should also shape the way we think about the destruction of innocent life in our own age. If we recoil at the slaughter of Bethlehem's infants, we should also recoil at abortion, at the exploitation of children, at trafficking, at abuse, and at all forms of violence that prey upon the young. The slaughter of the innocents is not merely an ancient historic horror. It is a mirror held before every generation that destroys the defenseless.

It is also worth mentioning Herod Archelaus, since he becomes relevant in the return narrative. Archelaus was one of Herod the Great's sons and inherited rule over Judea after his father's death. He proved so cruel and unstable that Joseph's fear of him was entirely reasonable. The whole Herodian household was marked by violence.





Yet even here, darkness does not prevail. Herod kills children in Bethlehem, but he cannot kill Christ. Human rage rises, but divine purpose stands. The Child lives. The mission continues. The kingdom of God is not stopped by the kingdom of man.

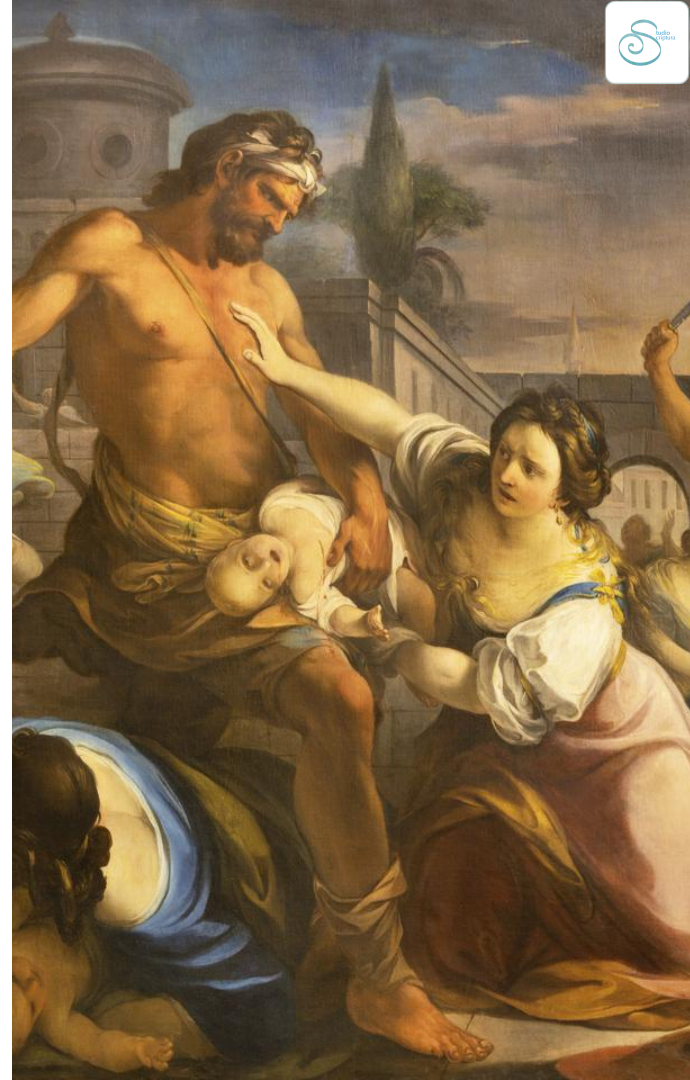
In our own day, we must not live in fear or allow paranoia to grip our hearts in the face of wicked rulers. Some live with anxious speculation, constantly imagining the worst. Others, chose indifference. And brothers and sisters in parts of the world where persecution and instability are real, face genuine danger and uncertainty. The Christians response and posture should always be prayer:

But the end of all things is at hand; therefore be serious and watchful in your prayers. 1 Peter 4:7 (NKJV)

Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence. 1 Timothy 2:1-2 (NKJV)

The Scriptures speak with clarity and comfort: God has not surrendered His throne, and history is not spinning out of control. Jesus Himself taught that His kingdom is not of this world (John 18:36, NKJV), meaning that the kingdom to which we belong stands above the kingdoms of men.

And He said to Pilate, “You could have no power at all against Me unless it had been given you from above” (John 19:11, NKJV). That truth steadies the heart. We must not fret or become fearful, for it is God who raises up earthly powers and brings them down according to His sovereign will (Daniel 2:21; Romans 13:1, NKJV).





Return to Nazareth and Growth in Wisdom, Spirit, and Grace

Matthew 2:19–23; Luke 2:39–40

After Herod the Great dies, Joseph is told in another dream to return to the land of Israel. But hearing that Archelaus, the cruel son of Herod the Great, now reigns in Judea, he is afraid to go there. Again warned by God, he turns aside to Galilee and settles in Nazareth.

Nazareth was obscure, small, and unimpressive. Later someone would ask, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Yet this becomes the place where Jesus grows up. God is not hesitant about insignificant places. Some of the most important years in redemptive history unfold in obscurity. Some of the most formative years in your own life may be unfolding in that same quiet way.





Luke says, “And the Child grew and became strong in spirit, filled with wisdom; and the grace of God was upon Him” (Luke 2:40, NKJV). We should ponder that carefully. The Son of God, in His true humanity, passed through stages of growth. He did not pretend to be a child. He was one. He grew physically, mentally, and in the lived expression of human maturity. This is not a denial of His deity. It is an affirmation of His real humanity, and Luke wants us to feel the reality of that ordinary, patient growth.

There is also a pattern here for us. Wisdom does not descend from nowhere. Grace in life is often cultivated through years of hidden obedience. Strength in spirit is not ordinarily formed in noise and hurry, but in steady faithfulness. Jesus grew in a carpenter's household, in an ordinary village, under parental authority, within the rhythms of daily life. That means ordinary life is not beneath God's work. It is often the place where God is most quietly shaping a person.





That has particular force for younger people today. The digital age makes obscurity feel like failure. Social media constantly tempts people to measure worth by clicks, followers, and likes. But Nazareth reminds us that seemingly insignificant years are not wasted. They may be years of preparation. God often works in places the world does not notice now - but is preparing a person for future ministry long before anyone else sees it.

The birth and early life of Jesus were not religious stories that grew over time. These events took place in real history. God worked through rulers, travel plans, family decisions, and difficult circumstances to accomplish exactly what He had promised. What looked ordinary on the surface was part of a much larger and eternal plan.

We also saw that from the beginning, people recognized that this child was different. Simeon understood that God had provided salvation. Anna gave thanks and spoke about Him to others as Redeemer. The shepherds returned to their work, but they carried the news with them. The wise men came because they believed He was a king worthy of worship.





But the reason Jesus came is the most important part. He came because we are sinners who cannot fix our own condition. Jesus lived without sin, died on the cross in the place of sinners, and rose again. That is the heart of the gospel.

And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins. Matthew 1:21



This class was prepared through personal study of Scripture and careful engagement with trusted scholarship on the Gospel of John. Generative AI tools were used to assist with certain aspects of research, organization, and the drafting of phrasing. All final interpretations, judgments, and content reflect the convictions of Studio Scriptura.