

MAX LUCADO

LIFE LESSONS *from*
MATTHEW
The Carpenter King

PREPARED BY THE LIVINGSTONE CORPORATION



THOMAS NELSON
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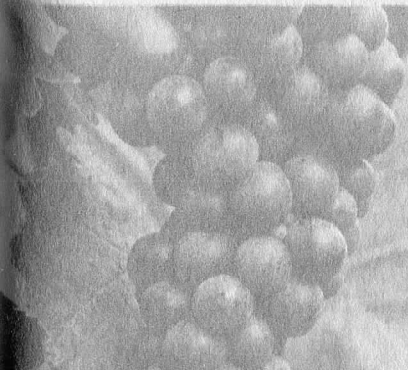
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LESSON ONE

GOD WITH SKIN ON

“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 NKJV



REFLECTION

Each December, Christians look back on the mind-boggling events of that first Christmas—angel armies appearing to awestruck shepherds, the star of Bethlehem guiding the wise men, and, of course, the baby in the manger. What do you do each holiday season to remember and savor the stunning claim of the gospel: that God took on flesh and made his dwelling among us?

SITUATION

Writing to his fellow Jews, Matthew begins his Gospel by demonstrating how Jesus descended (humanly speaking) from both Abraham and King David. He then discusses some of the circumstances surrounding Christ's virgin birth and stormy infancy. Matthew's Gospel is unique in that it provides the only account of the wise men's visit and King Herod's murderous plot to kill all male children under the age of two in the region of Bethlehem.

OBSERVATION

Read Matthew 1:18–2:12 from the New International Version or the New King James Version.

NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION

^{1:18} This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Because

Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

²⁰ 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. ²¹ 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."

²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ²³ "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us").

²⁴ When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. ²⁵ But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

^{2:1} After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem ² and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

³ When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴ When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

⁶ "But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for out of you will come a ruler
who will shepherd my people Israel."

⁷ Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸ He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

⁹ After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹ On coming to the house, 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, frankincense and myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

NEW KING JAMES VERSION

^{1:18} Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: After His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not wanting to make her a public example, was minded to put her away secretly. ²⁰ But while he thought about these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. ²¹ And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins."

²² So all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying: ²³ "Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel," which is translated, "God with us."

²⁴ Then Joseph, being aroused from sleep, did as the angel of the Lord commanded him and took to him his wife, ²⁵ and did not know her till she had brought forth her firstborn Son. And he called His name Jesus.

^{2:1} 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, ² saying, "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."

³ When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴ And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born.

⁵ So they said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it is written by the prophet:

⁶ 'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
Are not the least among the rulers of Judah;
For out of you shall come a Ruler
Who will shepherd My people Israel.'"

⁷ Then Herod, when he had secretly called the wise men, determined from them what time the star appeared. ⁸ And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the young Child, and when you have found Him, bring back word to me, that I may come and worship Him also."

⁹ When they heard the king, they departed; and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy. ¹¹ And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

¹² Then, being divinely warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed for their own country another way.

EXPLORATION

1. Why would Christ's ancestry have mattered to the Jewish readers of Matthew's Gospel?

2. It is often said that “things are not what they seem to be.” How does this statement apply to Mary’s pregnancy and the coming of Christ into the world?

3. What can we learn about Joseph’s character from Matthew 1–2?

4. What was Herod’s response to the news that Christ, “the king of the Jews,” had come?

5. Why do you think wise men from the East traveled so far and so long to find Christ, while Israel’s religious scholars and leaders didn’t look for him at all?

6. How did the wise men locate Jesus? What did they do when they finally found him?

INSPIRATION

People have always wondered about the image of God. Societies have speculated. Tribes have cogitated. And we’ve reached a variety of conclusions. God has been depicted as a golden calf and a violent wind and an angry volcano. He wears wings, breathes fire, eats infants, and demands penance. We’ve fancied God as ferocious, magical, fickle, and maniacal. A god to be avoided, dreaded, and appeased. But never in mankind’s wildest imaginings did we consider that God would enter the world as an infant.

“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14 NKJV). The Word became not a whirlwind or a devouring fire but a single cell, a fertilized egg, an embryo—a baby. Placenta nourished him. An amniotic sac surrounded him. He grew to the size of a fist. His tiny heart divided into chambers. God became flesh.

Jesus entered our world not *like* a human but *as* a human. He endured puberty, pimples, hot weather, and cranky neighbors. God became human down to his very toes. He had suspended the stars and ladled out the seas, yet he suckled a breast and slept in hay. . . .

Why such a journey? Why did God go so far?

A chief reason is this: *he wants you to know that he gets you.* He understands how you feel and has faced what you face. Jesus is not “out of touch with our reality. He’s been through weakness and testing, experienced it all—all but the sin. So let’s walk right up to him and get what he is so ready to give. Take the mercy, accept the help” (Hebrews 4:15–16 MSG).

Since you know he understands, you can boldly go to him. Because of Bethlehem’s miracle, you can answer these fundamental questions: *Does God care if I’m sad?* Look at the tear-streaked face of Jesus as he stands near Lazarus’s tomb. *Does God notice when I’m afraid?* Note the resolve in the eyes of Jesus as he marches through the storm to rescue his friends. *Does God know if I am ignored or rejected?* Find the answer in the compassionate eyes of Christ as he stands to defend the adulterous woman. . . .

Gaze where Mary gazed. Look into God's face and be assured. If the King was willing to enter the world of animals and shepherds and swaddling clothes, don't you think he's willing to enter yours? He took on your face in the hope that you would see his. (From *Because of Bethlehem* by Max Lucado.)

REACTION

7. How do you respond to the biblical claim that for three decades, the Creator of heaven and earth actually moved into the midst of his creation?

8. Why do you think it is difficult for some to grasp that Jesus is God incarnate?

9. When has God seemed the most real, the most tangible, and the most near to you?

10. What lessons can you learn from Joseph about submitting to the big purposes of God?

11. How do the wise men on the one hand and King Herod on the other represent the two divergent responses most people have to Christ?

12. The wise men gave so much to Christ—their attention, time, energy, effort, affection, worship, and wealth. They risked their lives, and perhaps also their careers, credibility, and reputations. Take a moment to assess your life and your devotion to Christ. Right now, what specifically are you giving him?

LIFE LESSONS

If we ever doubt God's love for us, we need look no further than the child of Bethlehem. That's no mere infant lying there in the feeding trough—he's Deity in diapers. The universe watched with wonder as heaven's (and earth's) King learned to walk. Jesus would grow up in a Jewish home. For thirty-three years he would feel everything you and I have ever felt. Weakness. Weariness. Fear of failure. Temptation. Fully human, we can safely assume Christ got colds and that he stumped his toes. His feelings got hurt. His feet got tired. And his head ached. To think of Jesus in such a light is—well, it seems almost irreverent, doesn't it? It's not something we like to do; it's uncomfortable. It is much easier to keep the humanity out of the incarnation. But it's also unbiblical. Christ was God . . . with skin on.

