

CHRISTMAS STORY

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Chapter 1 -- The Age Of Darkness

Two thousand years ago, the Roman Empire stretched out across the reaches of Europe, Africa, and Asia. The governments of the world had begun to form. In a land known as Palestine, a Roman general by the name Pompey takes over a city known as Jerusalem and the law of the emperor becomes the law of the land.

For countless centuries before that, the people of the world lived as nomadic tribes, moving themselves and their flocks and herds from place to place -- land to distant land.

From the dawn of time, religions around the world began to spring up. Who was God? To the early citizens of Rome, it was Jupiter. To the citizens of Athens, it was Zeus. To the people of Ephesus, it was the goddess Artemis, in Egypt, it was Ra along with others. In the land of Israel, God was known as Yahweh, who's name was held with such reverence that most only referred to it as 'Lord.'

So many gods. So many cultures. And of all these, only one was truly God. A time had come to make right an allowed wrong that had been going on since the beginning of time itself. Yahweh would send His son to deliver His message. This is his story . . .

Chapter 2 – Gabriel's Messages

In a land known as Judea, a Roman king known as "Herod the Great" ruled. The Romans had conquered this land only a few years before and he sat on a throne of power under an emperor named Augustus.

Yes, the people of Judea had their king, but most were *lead* by priests. They were the highly respected religious leaders of the time.

Among these, was a man named Zechariah. He and his wonderful wife Elizabeth were very old. For their whole life, they longed to have children, but Elizabeth could not have any. Regardless, Zechariah always prayed that some day they could have children of their own.

One day Zechariah's group of priests were on duty and he was serving God

as priest in a temple. According to the custom of the priests, he had been chosen to go inside to burn incense, while the other priests and the people who had come to the temple stood outside praying. "After I finish, I'll be right out," Zechariah said.

The aroma of the incense filled the air. Quietly, as Zechariah knelt at the alter, he prayed for his wife, as he had done so often in the past, that she may someday have the happiness of a child. . . even though he knew it was impossible.

Zechariah had just finished this when suddenly an angel appeared out of nowhere. Zechariah was scared and trembled with fear. Priests always prayed, but had they ever *really* seen an angle?

The angle saw that Zechariah was confused and afraid, so it spoke in a reassuring voice, "Don't be afraid Zechariah! God has heard your prayers. Your wife Elizabeth will have a son and you will name him John. His birth will make you very happy."

Zechariah lifted his eyes in amazement at the angel, who continued, "Many people will be glad because your son will be a great servant of the Lord." The angel came closer and deepened his voice. . . as if to stress his next words: "He must never drink wine or beer, and the power of the Holy Spirit will be with him from the time he is born."

"The Holy Spirit!," Zechariah said in amazement.

The angel continued, "Your John will lead many people in Israel to turn back to the Lord their God." The angel began to describe the story of an ancient prophet known as Elijah and how that Elijah's very spirit would be with John as he was preparing the way for the Lord. Zechariah listened with amazement, but doubted the angel's message.

This did not deter the angle as he began to glow with his story. "Because of John, parents will be more thoughtful of their children. And people who now disobey God will begin to think as they ought to. This is how John will get people ready for the Lord." The angel smiled, quite pleased with the story he was telling.

Despite the fact that the angel was standing there in the flesh, Zechariah didn't believe him and protested to the angel: "How will I know this is going to happen? My wife and I are very old."

The angle answered, “I am Gabriel, God’s servant, and I was sent to tell you this good news.” He looked sternly at Zechariah, “You have not believed what I have said. So you will not be able to say a thing until all this happens. But everything will take place when it is supposed to.” With that, the angle vanished.

Zechariah tried to yell out to the angle when he realized that his voice was gone.

The crowd outside was waiting for Zechariah and kept wondering why he was staying so long in the temple. When he did come out, he could not speak, and they knew he had seen a vision. He motioned to them with his hands, but did not say a thing.

Later that day, Zechariah went home and soon afterward, his wife was expecting a baby. For the next five months she did not leave the house. She was very joyful at the events that Gabriel’s visit had set into motion.

It was about a month later when God sent Gabriel on another mission. This time he was to visit a young virgin girl. Her name was Mary.

Mary wasn’t very old at the time, only about 13 or 14, but according to custom, she was engaged to marry a gentleman from the royal family of King David – the ruler of Israel 28 generations before.

“Greetings.”

Mary spun around and looked to see who spoke the word into the quietness of her empty room. An entity of radiant brilliance stood before her.

“You are truly blessed!,” the angle exclaimed. He moved closer to Mary and softly said, “The Lord is with you.”

Mary looked at this beautiful creature for a moment and in bewilderment said, “I don’t understand? Who or what are you . . . and what are you talking about?”

A large and genuine grin crossed his face, “My name is Gabriel. Please Mary, don’t be afraid! God is pleased with you and something very good is about to happen.”

“What do you mean?”

“You will have a son,” the angel continued. “His name will be Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of God Most High. The Lord God will make him king, as his ancestor David was. He will rule the people of Israel forever, and his kingdom will never end.”

Mary asked the angel, “How can this happen? I am not even married yet!”

“Dearest Mary,” the angel said, “set with me and I will tell you a story.”

Gabriel motioned for Mary to set down next to him and told her, “Before time and space was ever created, there was one whom we call the ‘Word.’ The Word was with God and was truly God.”

“What do you mean?,” Mary asked... obviously confused.

“See, with this Word, God created all things and nothing was made without it.” Gabriel waved his hands over Mary’s eyes and for a moment she was able to see in her mind a vast void, filled with a ribbon of energy.

Gabriel continued, “Everything that was created received its life from Him, and His life gave light to everyone.

“This light – this spirit – keeps shining in the dark, and darkness has never put it out.”

Gabriel looked carefully at Mary for a moment and said, “The Holy Spirit will come down to you, and God’s power will come over you.”

Mary was astonished at what the angel was telling her. Gabriel smiled and continued, “So, your child will be called the holy Son of God. And guess what?”

“What?,” Mary asked, her amazement growing more and more each second.

“Your relative Elizabeth is going to have a son even though she is old.” A thoughtful expression crossed his face. “You know,” he said, “no one ever thought she could have a baby, but in three months she will have a son. You see Mary, nothing is impossible for God.”

Mary just set there for a moment, completely astonished at what the angel had told her. After letting his message sink in she said, “I am the Lord’s servant!. Let it happen as you have said.”

Gabriel gave her the smile only an angel would have, and with that he left her.

Mary was overjoyed at this fact and left Nazareth to visit Elizabeth in Judea.

Knock. Knock. Knock, Mary rapped, excitedly at her cousin’s door. “Elizabeth!” Mary yelled, “Are you home?”

When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the baby kicked inside her. At that moment, she become filled with the Holy Spirit and said, “Please come in dear cousin. I know why you are here!”

Mary rushed in to tell Elizabeth all about the good news of the angel’s visit, but Elizabeth had news of her own to share with Mary. “God has blessed you more than any other woman!,” Elizabeth began, “He has also blessed the child you will have.” A look of puzzlement spread across her face, “Why would the mother of my Lord come to visit me?” Joyfully she gave Mary a hug, “As soon as I heard your greeting, my baby became very happy and moved within me. And the Lord has blessed you because you believed that he will keep his promise.”

Blushing, Mary said, “With all my heart I praise the Lord and I am glad because God is my Savior.” She smiled, “God cares for me, his humble servant.”

The two shared their experiences and Mary decide to stay with her cousin until Elizabeth’s child was born. And then she returned home to Nazareth.

When Elizabeth’s son was born, her neighbors and relatives were very glad for her. But they all were wondering why she had named her baby “John.”

“No one in your family is named that,” one person said. In fact, they all began asking Zechariah what he really wanted to name him.

Zechariah asked for a writing tablet. Then he wrote, “His name is John.” Everyone was amazed. Right away, Zechariah’s voice returned. “Praise God!,” he exclaimed, “it is all coming true!”

Chapter 3 – The First Christmas

About that time, Emperor Augustus gave orders for the names of all the people in the Roman Empire to be listed in the record books. Basically, he was taking a census, so that all could be taxed.

In order for this to be done, everyone had to go to their own hometown to be listed. So Joseph had to leave Nazareth in Galilee and go to Bethlehem in Judea. Long ago, Bethlehem had been King David’s hometown, so Joseph went there because he was from David’s family.

Mary was still engaged to Joseph and traveled with him to Bethlehem. He almost broke off the engagement when he learned that Mary was pregnant.

“I find your story impossible to believe,” he had told her.

“But it is true Joseph,” Mary had said. “I have been good and faithful, you must believe me.”

“It is just very hard. Perhaps we should break of our engagement quietly.”

Joseph had left to ponder what Mary had told him. As he lie on his bed, he thought about the incredible things she had told him. About how the angle visited Elizabeth first, then her. ‘Maybe her and her cousin got together and made up the whole story as so Mary would not be disgraced.’ No. Mary really was a good woman. But still . . .

As Joseph drifted off to sleep, an angel from the Lord came to him in a dream. The angel said, “Joseph, the baby that Mary will have is from the Holy Spirit. Go ahead and marry her. Then after her baby is born, name him Jesus because he will save his people from their sins.”

Joseph woke up, unsure of what had just happened. “Jesus,” the angel had told him. Strangely, the name meant “The Lord Saves,” in Hebrew.

The distance between Nazareth and Bethlehem was about eighty miles as they traveled onward. Mary was riding on the back of a donkey. She was very close to having the baby, by the time they had arrived.

Unfortunately, the inn in Bethlehem had no vacancies when the couple arrived and Mary started going into labor. Joseph quickly helped her into a nearby barn and the little baby was born. She found wide strips of cloth and wrapped him snugly. Then, she laid him on a soft bed of hay, since there was no beds in the inn.

That night, a young shepherd boy gazed up at the stars. ‘What a clear night,’ he had thought. Several other shepherds were near by and all was quite, except for the soft sound of a sheep every now and then.

All at once an angel came down to them from the Lord. It shined so brightly that the entire field lit up and they all became very, very frightened.

“Don’t be afraid!” The angel announced, “I have good news for you, which will make everyone happy.”

The shepherds stood quietly and listened intently.

“This very day a Savior is born for you. Right down there.” He pointed toward Bethlehem. “You will know who he is, because you will find him dressed in baby clothes and laying on a bed of hay.”

“You mean he’s in a barn?” the shepherd boy who had been gazing at the stars asked.

“Yes!” The boy spun around. This time, it was another angel who had answered him. Suddenly, the entire field was full angels and they all started to sing praises.

“Let’s go to Bethlehem and see what the Lord has told us about.” So, they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby laying on a bed of hay.

When the shepherds saw Jesus, they told his parents what the angel had said about him. Everyone listened and was surprised. But Mary kept thinking about all this and wondering what it meant.

Later, on the way back to the fields, one of the shepherds said to the other, “Can you believe it? The King of Glory is born tonight, not in a palace in Rome, not in the world’s capital, but in little Bethlehem!”

“Yes, and how the angels sang his praises,” another replied. “It seems God has honored a poor peasant girl to be his promised Son’s mother. You saw for yourself, the barn was filled with glory.”

“And look,” the first one said, “the honored guests of this great occasion were us – sheep herders, personally invited by the messenger from heaven!”

As they went back to their sheep they knew the world would never be the same from that night forward.

“It is a sign of things to come.” One shepherd had said.

“It is a statement to the poor and unknown,” replied another.

“It is a gift,” the boy finally said, and set beneath a tree to watch the stars.