

## **Exceedingly Great Joy**

by Tricia Berg

*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, saying, "Where is He who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw His star when it rose and have come to worship Him." When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: "And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.'" Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him." Matthew 2:1-8*

*After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way. Matthew 2:9-12*

Because of the digital scrapbook quickpage I have used for this day's page on Layout for Today (see the end of this article), I feel it necessary to clarify a couple of things. The first, of course, is that according to the above Bible passage, the wise men visited Jesus in a house. So it was not the night of His birth, which brings us to the second thing. We don't know the date of His birth. The idea that we know when Jesus was born and that there were three wise men who brought gifts to the stable are merely traditions that have been observed for a very long time. The date of "Christmas" was chosen in order to divert the worship practiced by pagans on that date from false gods to Jesus. They intended to replace lies with the truth, but kept many of the associated practices. We all know that secular society today prefers to say "holiday" in order to avoid honoring Christ. Perhaps some haven't thought about or don't realize that the "mas" part refers to the Roman Catholic mass. (Heb. 9:25-28)

Based on the age of the male children killed on Herod's orders (two and under), we can assume that Jesus was at least a year old, probably pretty close to two. It appears that the star appeared when Jesus was born and continued in the sky long enough for the wise men to make their journey all the way from the East. Herod consulted his own people and discovered approximately how long ago the star had first been observed in the sky. He then based his orders of infanticide based on that time frame.

*Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah: "A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted, because they are no more." But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, "Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child's life are dead." And he rose and took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there, and being warned in a dream he withdrew to the district of Galilee. And he went and lived in a city called Nazareth, so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, that he would be called a Nazarene. Matthew 2:16-23*

Contrary to the popular recreations of the event, where "artistic license" is taken, there is no mention of an innkeeper or his wife, or even any animals being present. It is my belief that Jesus was born in the shepherd's tower where the sacrificial lambs were cared for—including, it would reasonably seem, "swaddling" to keep them from blemishes and spots that would disqualify them as acceptable offerings. (Ex. 12:5, John 1:29, 1Pet. 1:17-21, Heb. 9:13-14) This would explain why the shepherds didn't need detailed instructions as to how to get to the place where they could see Jesus with their own eyes, but rather knew exactly where to go.

*In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. And in the same region there were*

*shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!" When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. Luke 2:1-20*

*And you, O tower of the flock, hill of the daughter of Zion, to you shall it come, the former dominion shall come, kingship for the daughter of Jerusalem. Micah 4:8*

*But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days. Micah 5:2 (quoted in the passage from Matthew at the top)*

We also don't actually know for sure how many wise men there were (or their names), but there were three gifts. The gifts themselves are not only fit for a King because of their value, but the frankincense and myrrh symbolize the suffering that Jesus would endure on behalf of mankind. (Both kinds of precious resins were harvested by piercing the tree bark in order to collect the sap that is released. <https://science.howstuffworks.com/life/botany/question283.htm>) In like manner, Simeon prophesied strife for Jesus and pain for Mary when He was presented at the temple on the 33rd day following His birth. (Lev. 12)

*And when the time came for their purification according to the Law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord") and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the Law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons." Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it*

*had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. And he came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the Law, he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said, "Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel." And his father and his mother marveled at what was said about him. And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, "Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed." And there was a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having lived with her husband seven years from when she was a virgin, and then as a widow until she was eighty-four. She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day. And coming up at that very hour she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem. Luke 2:22-38*

There's one more instance (actually two) of Jesus receiving a valuable offering of a substance with great value that represented suffering. It was when His feet were anointed with spikenard by Mary of Bethany six days before the Passover, and His head was anointed with it four days before Passover by an unnamed woman. (Matt. 26:7-13, Mark 14:3-9, Luke 7:36-50, John 12:1-8, John 11:2) Spikenard must be crushed to obtain the ointment, just as Jesus was crushed for our iniquities (sins, transgressions).

*But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. Isaiah 53:5*

The King James version says "by His stripes" and other translations say wounds, bruises or scourging. But regardless of the exact wording, we are healed of our spiritual sickness which led to death because He was willing to suffer and lay down His life for us to give us new life. (John 10:17-18, 2Cor. 5:17, Rom. 6, 1John 2:1-6) Jesus healed people of physical ailments throughout His earthly ministry, but He didn't receive "stripes" until the end of it. (Matt. 8:16-17) When we believe, we are born again spiritually. (John 5:24, John 3:3-8, Romans 8) Read the whole 8<sup>th</sup> chapter of Romans so as to appreciate the context, to gain a solid understanding, rather than extracting a comforting verse here and there. Also read a bit before and after any given chapter, since those breaks were not in the original texts. Don't "pick" one verse over another when there seems to be a discrepancy, but study until you understand how the Scriptures harmonize

with one another. We need to accept that God is good when He is extending grace and mercy by forgiving us and rescuing us from tribulation as well as when He is testing us by allowing suffering, or executing judgment. ALL of His ways are PERFECT. (Isa. 29:16)

Once redeemed by the blood of Jesus, we belong to Him forevermore. (1Cor. 6:18-20, Rev. 5:9, Gal. 3:13, Gal. 4:4-6, Titus 2:11-15, 1Pet. 1:18-23) As believers, we appreciate beyond description the fact that God gave His only begotten Son, beloved and perfect in every way, in order to save us from the wages of our sin (death and eternal punishment - Rom. 6:23, Matt. 25:46, 2Cor. 5:21, Matt. 3:16-17, Matt. 12:15-21, Isaiah 42:1-9, Matt. 17:1-8, Prov. 30:4-6, Rom. 10:6-7, John 3:13-14). The wise men didn't give one another gifts in honor of Jesus. They gave their best TO Him. That's what we should do as well, our whole lives long, every day. (Rom. 12:1-2, 1Pet. 2:4-5) We are free to honor God in whatever manner we believe will please Him according to our understanding of His word and ways. (Gal. 4:10, Rom. 14:5-12, 1Cor. 10:31, 2Cor. 5:14-15, Rom. 2:6-11, Col. 1:9-14, 2Pet. 3:14-18, 1Tim. 4:7-16, Jam. 2:12) If we choose to celebrate with decorating, feasting and gift-giving as our way of remembering God's gift of Jesus, I hope we take care to also remember those less fortunate than us and those who haven't heard the Good News yet while doing so.

*"Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions, and give to the needy. Provide yourselves with moneybags that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." Luke 12:32-34*

*He said also to the man who had invited him, "When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just." Luke 14:12-14*

Before I accepted my utmost need of Jesus as my Savior, when I thought I was a pretty decent person, it used to bother me when pastors would talk about Jesus' death and resurrection on Christmas. I thought they were "ruining" the holiday. God forgives me for that shameful line of thinking, which was out of ignorance. (Acts 17:30-31, Eph. 4:17-18, 1Tim. 1:13-17, 1John 3:19-24, Matt. 12:30-33, John 3:16-18, Isaiah 9:6-7, John 12:27, John 18:37) However, it does bring into question whether the way that the majority of the world celebrates the birth of our Savior is bringing many of those people any closer to

God. If people who claim to have devout faith have the exact same traditions as those who don't believe (or have a very shallow belief)—there is practically no difference—then how is that evangelizing the unsaved? (Of course, this goes for every day, not only Christmas. We're meant to be LIGHTS. Matt. 5:16, Philip. 2:14-16)

*For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. 1 Corinthians 1:18*

I don't know any believer who doesn't have someone they love who does not yet believe, and it greatly concerns them (myself included). However, we need to remember that we didn't save ourselves. Rather than give in to anguish and despair, we need to remember that God used various means to prepare us for that moment when He would reach into our willing hearts and renew our spirits with His love. (1Cor. 3:6-9, Titus 3:4-8) He brought us to a knowledge of the truth about our lost condition and the only Remedy, and gave us the gift of faith. (Eph. 2:8-10, Rom. 3:23, Rom. 6:23, Rom. 10:17) Prior to and all the way up to that time, we were unbelievers as well. So let's not lose hope and give up, but continue steadfastly in prayer and love in both word and deed, trusting that God is able and He is good. (Col. 4:2, Col. 3:12-17, Col. 3:23-25, 1Thess. 5:14-22, 2Thess. 2:16-17, 1John 3:16-18, John 4:36, Gal. 6:9, Jam. 2:13-17, Psa. 36:5-9, Psa. 51, Psa. 63:3-4, Psa. 66:20, Psa. 69:13, Psa. 86:5, Psa. 86:15, Psa. 100:5, Psa. 103:8, Psa. 115:1, Psa. 117, Psa. 136, Psa. 145)

*Show us your steadfast love, O LORD, and grant us your salvation. Let me hear what God the LORD will speak, for he will speak peace to his people, to his saints; but let them not turn back to folly. Surely his salvation is near to those who fear him, that glory may dwell in our land. Steadfast love and faithfulness meet; righteousness and peace kiss each other. Faithfulness springs up from the ground, and righteousness looks down from the sky. Psalm 85:7-11*

It's of vital importance that our children hear about His (and ONLY His) saving grace, mercy and love. (Matt. 19:13-15, John 14:6, 1John 2:23) They need to know that God is real in this confusing world where media special effects are very convincing, and the majority go along with the flow rather than standing up for their faith. The world cannot be trusted to offer true wisdom, and in fact, often serves up deception. (1Cor. 1:18-31, 1Cor. 2:14, 1Cor. 3:18-20, Rom. 1:18-32, 2Cor. 3:12-17, 2Pet. 3) Everyone will see with their own eyes one day, but blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe. (John 20:29, Philip. 2:10-11)

*For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. For the Scripture says, "Everyone who believes in him*

*will not be put to shame." For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!" Romans 10:10-15*

We can be filled with joy every moment of every day—it doesn't depend upon our circumstances. (1Tim. 6:6-12, Heb. 10:32-35) What's really important is not whether we had a "white Christmas," or got what we wanted in the way of gifts, or whether our feast included every single item we enjoy eating or drinking the most, or if the tree tipped over—making a mess, breaking things, or whether a gift we ordered arrived on time, or whether our flight was delayed when traveling to spend the holiday with family, or whether we had a fender bender in the parking lot when we ran out for that last minute item, etc. These things belong to this temporary world that is going to pass away. (John 2:15-16)

Problems of every kind, even severe financial, family or health troubles, pale in significance when compared to the glory of our citizenship in heaven. (Philip. 3:7-21) No one can take from us our most precious possession. (Rom. 8:31-39) If we look carefully at that list of what can't separate us from God, we can see that it's not meant to be reassurance that if we despise the ways of God and give Him crumbs of ourselves, then He is pleased. (Heb. 12, Rom. 12:1-2, John 15:10, John 8:29) The passage is meant to assure those who suffer for Jesus' sake that He will never leave them or forsake them. (Heb. 13:1-9, 1Pet. 5:6-11, Rom. 8:15-19, Col. 3)

Our joy is deep down in our hearts. (Acts 14:17, John 16:33) And God wants our whole hearts, every day of the year, right up until the end. (1Chron. 29:9, Psa. 9:1, Psa. 16:8-9, Psa. 86:11-13, Psa. 111, Psa. 119:1-16, Mark 12:32-34, 2Cor. 6:11-13, Heb. 4:12-16, Heb. 10:19-31, Rev. 3:11) We're looking forward to the time when we'll see Him face to face and worship Him continually forever, but we don't have to wait—we can start NOW. (1Cor. 13:11-13, 1Pet. 1:8-9, 1Cor. 2:9, Rev. 21-22, John 4:23, Jam. 4:8) After all He has made and done, isn't He worthy of all we can give Him in return?

*And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Colossians 3:15*

Written by Tricia Berg, (December 2017), 7 pp. + digital scrapbook layout If you have been blessed by this article, you are free to share but do not claim as your own or sell, and do not

make modifications and attribute them to me. You can download as many free pdf devotional articles as you wish from my blog: <http://layoutfortoday.blogspot.com/> (The most recent articles are at the bottom of the page after you click on the "free pdf downloads" tab at the top of the page.) You can also read this article there, where the Bible verses should pop up when you hover over the cites.



Quickpage by Chelle Creations, paper by Kristmess Designs