

Mary's Miraculous Conception

Matthew 1:18

The Naming of John

Luke 1:57-66

From Nazareth to Bethlehem

Luke 2:4, 5

God's Faithfulness

I Thessalonians 5:24



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December 6, 2015 — No. 3805

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Reformed Witness Hour
(www.reformedwitnesshour.org)

Station Listings

Station	Location	Frequency	Time/day
KARI	Blaine, WA.....	550AM.....	8:00 P.M./Sunday
KCWN	Pella, IA.....	99.9FM.....	3:30 P.M./Sunday
KDCR	Sioux Center, IA.....	88.5FM.....	5:00 P.M./Sunday
KGDN	Tri-Cities Walla Walla, OR.....	101.3FM.....	5:00 P.M./Sunday
KLOH	Pipestone, MN.....	1050AM.....	8:00 A.M./Sunday
KLTT	Denver, CO.....	670AM.....	1:30 P.M./Sunday
KPRO	Riverside, CA.....	1570AM.....	11:30 A.M./Sunday
KSPO	Spokane, WA.....	106.5FM.....	5:00 P.M./Sunday
KTAC	Moses Lake, WA.....	93.9FM.....	5:00 P.M./Sunday
KTBI	Wenatchee/Moses Lake, WA.....	810AM.....	5:00 P.M./Sunday
KTRW	Spokane, WA.....	630AM.....	9:30 A.M./Sunday
KYAK	Yakima, WA.....	930AM.....	5:00 P.M./Sunday
WFDL	Fond Du Lac, WI.....	1170AM.....	8:00 A.M./Sunday
WFUR	Grand Rapids, MI.....	102.9FM.....	8:00 A.M./Sunday
WFUR	Grand Rapids, MI.....	1570AM, 92.9FM ...	4:00 P.M./Sunday
	NYC-Long Island, NY.....	101.5FM, 94.9FM, 104.5FM, 96.5FM ...	8:30 A.M./Sunday
WORD	Pittsburgh, PA.....	101.5FM.....	10:00 A.M./Sunday
WPGF	Carlisle, PA.....	91.3FM.....	8:00 A.M./Sunday
UK			
GOSPEL	Northern Ireland.....	846AM.....	8:30 A.M./Sunday
Canada			
CKNX	Wingham, ON.....	920 AM.....	7:00 A.M./Sunday

THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR

December 6, 2015
No. 3805

Mary's Miraculous Conception
Rev. Wilbur Bruinsma

Dear radio friends,

Introduction

We have a few more verses to consider in the letter of Jude. But we are going to take this month to concentrate on a number of passages of Scripture that center in the incarnation and birth of our Savior. It is always good to remind ourselves of the amazing work of God in our salvation made possible through the conception and birth of Christ. The passage we study today will reveal that to us as well. We are going to consider Matthew 1:18: "Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise: When as his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost." This is the initial verse in the account of an angel's appearance to Joseph, the man to whom Mary was espoused at the time. We will briefly consider this account but wish to focus our attention on this one particular verse. In this verse is contained a fundamental doctrine of the Christian faith: the virgin birth. It is the truth voiced in all ecumenical confessions, including our Apostles Creed: "I believe in Jesus Christ who was conceived by the Holy

Ghost, born of the virgin Mary." As believers we confess this blessed truth: Jesus was born of the *virgin* Mary. It is one of the great truths of Scripture!

On the foreground of this verse we consider, front and center, stands the miracle of the incarnation: God becoming man. This miracle is mind-boggling. It is beyond all human imagination that Christ is, in the divine Person of the Son of God, both man and God.

That is the great truth we learn in today's broadcast. As we do, however, we do not want to glean out the doctrine of Christ's divinity and consider it in the abstract. Our text has historical content that also must be considered. All this took place in the lives of Mary and Joseph—a young couple who were engaged to be married. We cannot help but think of the shame Joseph must have felt when he found out that Mary was expecting a child, and that the baby was not his!

We can understand his actions. He was a good man and a just. We must also see what great faith he, as well as Mary, revealed when told all of these

things. I mean, the faith of these two saints is truly exemplary to us! This wonderful truth of Christ's divine conception touched the personal lives of these two people in a way that is hard to imagine. That too we must understand when considering this passage of God's Word.

MARY'S MIRACULOUS CONCEPTION

I. A Surprised Couple

Joseph and Mary were espoused, that is, they were engaged. They were a poor but a happy young couple, both of whom looked forward to a simple life together as husband and wife. The Bible is not interested in this fact, but neither ought we to think the relationship with them was any different than any other young man and woman who are engaged to be married. They, no doubt, were excited and were busy making plans to marry soon. Joseph was a man of Nazareth, a small, insignificant village tucked away in the hills of Galilee. He was a carpenter by trade but was far from independently wealthy. He was an honest and upright man. He was also a man of faith.

The Scriptures tell us very little of Joseph really. When Jesus began His earthly ministry, Joseph is hardly mentioned. But Joseph had to be a godly man of simple and heroic faith. After all, when the angel ap-

peared to him and told him of Christ's miraculous conception in the womb of his betrothed, he bowed before God's will. He knew it would cause him shame and derision among family and friends. No one would believe the miraculous birth of Jesus. But he was willing to undergo all this, and for that reason did not hesitate to take Mary to be his wife.

It also took great faith for him when, soon after the birth of Jesus, he took Mary and Jesus to Egypt for approximately two years to escape Herod's wrath. So, we must not short Joseph of his faith, though little is said of him. He was a good husband and, to all intents and purposes, a good father too! This young Joseph had asked Mary to be his bride. How exciting, isn't that, young women. Joseph had asked this young woman of about 17 or 18 to marry him! Mary was of humble birth too. Though both she and Joseph were born of the line of David, that line had fallen into oblivion. Mary was born and raised in Nazareth as well—probably a neighbor of Joseph. Much more is known of Mary than of Joseph, of course, not because she was herself holy or without sin, as the Romish church likes to make of her. She did not assist Christ in our salvation, as this church continues to contend. She is not some special saint.

Mary was a normal young girl who grew up in a little village. She had her sins and weaknesses just like every other saint. She too, was a woman of faith, however. She bowed before the announcement of the angel to her, that she would conceive and bring forth the Messiah, the Christ. She too bore humbly the shame and degradation that people must have heaped upon her, finding her with child before being married. And though at times her actions during Jesus' earthly ministry were a bit rash, nevertheless she believed in Jesus as the Savior and Christ. So, Mary and Joseph are indeed examples to us. Though the nation of Israel as a whole was characterized by legalism and work righteousness, there were still those who lived in faith.

Now, what is important in the verse we consider is the fact that Joseph had asked for Mary's hand in marriage. They were espoused, we read. That means that they were betrothed or engaged. This engagement was not marked by the giving of a diamond, however. In those days, engagement was much more permanent than it is today. A bill of engagement was drawn up that both signed. In that bill not only were the obligations of the betrothed outlined, but the amount of a dowry that must be paid by the young man to the father of the

girl. To be espoused, therefore, was a formal covenant that as much as signified marriage. It could only be broken by means of a formal writing of divorce. But because this betrothal was *not* marriage itself, those engaged were to abstain from any kind of physical relationship with one another. For that reason, espousal was usually a very short period of time—maybe a year at most. All of this comes into play, of course, when we read of the subsequent actions of Joseph when he found out Mary was expecting a child. He was going to put her away privately by a writ of divorcement and not make a public spectacle out of her. So, Joseph and Mary were betrothed.

What a surprise it was to Joseph, then, to hear that his espoused was great with child! Joseph knew it was not his child. He had been faithful to the commandments of God and shown utter respect for his young fiancée. He must have gone through the same range of emotions that anyone would if they knew their loved one was unfaithful: anger, bitterness, resentment, shame. Joseph must also have given some very heavy consideration to what had happened. He, no doubt, heard Mary's explanation of what took place. But let's face it, if some young girl today made the claim that Mary did, would we believe it? Conception is impos-

sible without a human father! Joseph did not believe Mary either—until later, of course, when the angel confirmed it. But then Joseph’s surprise was probably no greater than was Mary’s surprise when the angel also appeared to her and told her she would conceive. We read of this account in Luke 1:26-31: “And in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth, to a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin’s name was Mary.... And the angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favor with God. And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name JESUS.” Mary bowed before this announcement of the angel. She believed. But she was surprised and even troubled when she first heard of what was going to take place. How was she going to explain this? What shame she would have to bear too. No one would believe her. Not even Joseph believed her. He was going to put her away. And the good man that he was he was not going to make a public matter out of it all by taking her to court. He decided simply to sign the bill of divorcement that would break off the engagement.

We ought not to underestimate what personal difficulties this miraculous conception of Mary caused her and Joseph.

They never lived down the shame, it seems. There definitely was a stigma attached to Joseph and Mary, as well as to Jesus Himself, because of this miraculous birth. Yet, in all of this we must see the simple faith of this man and woman. They believed. We too are called upon to believe! What we hear today is a marvelous and humanly impossible thing. Yet it is exactly in this, the incarnation of Christ, that we rejoice. If what the Word of God says in this verse before us today is not true, then there is no reason at all for rejoicing! None at all!

II. A Divine Conception

We have in our text the amazing truth of a virgin birth! A woman who had never known a man intimately, who had never, to use the words of our text, “come together” with a man, conceived a child. She was a young woman, she was an unwed woman who had preserved herself pure and holy, she was a virgin—and she conceived a child! I know the reaction of unbelief to this truth, dear listener. The reaction of unbelief is: nice story! Children love to hear it! But it is a story, a fairy-tale! It is not truth. It cannot be truth, because all of us know that in order for a woman to conceive there must be a man. By no stretch of genetics, except perhaps by cloning, which we

eternal kingdom in heaven. He has promised us that. He said to Abraham, Your seed will inherit the land of Canaan. And God has never turned from fulfilling that promise to Abraham. He gave the spiritual seed of Abraham the earthly land of Canaan as an inheritance.

But today, too, God is fulfilling that promise to Abraham. He still says to the believing sons and daughters of Abraham, I will give you the land of Canaan. I will give you that land of which the earthly Canaan was only a picture. I will give you the heavenly land of Canaan. And even as God continues to call us into the kingdom of His dear Son, God continues to fulfill exactly what He has promised. This is why He has added to this promise another promise: I will never leave you or forsake you. That is a promise that is repeated constantly, throughout all of Scripture. I will be a God unto you and I will never leave you or forsake you! God promises us that because, if He were to leave us even but for a moment, we would fall and never return. But God upholds us by His Spirit and grace. In those hours of sorest temptation and trial He directs us. When we hurt the most, we can turn to Him and find our comfort. When the temptations of this world are around us, we can flee to God, who is our strong high tower and our defense. When

the wicked turn on us in hatred, we can run under the shelter of God’s wings and be safe.

Yes, but what about my sin? We know our sin! The child of God who struggles with his sin hears God say to him, Fear not, little child. I have made you a promise. I told you that I am your God and you are my child. I have sent my only begotten Son into this world and He has taken on Himself your sin and guilt and borne them away. You are made righteous in His blood. I have removed the burden of your sin. Through the precious work of Jesus Christ I have adopted you to be my very own son and daughter. For Christ’s sake I will never abandon you. Do not fear. I am faithful to my children. I will keep my promise. At the end of this year again, we look to Jesus Christ as our only comfort in life and in death. For His sake God is faithful who calls us out of darkness and into His light. God will preserve our going out and coming in for Christ’s sake! God will perform His work in us until the day Jesus comes on the clouds of glory to usher in our final salvation. Then we all will be holy—perfectly holy—completely holy—because there will be no more sin. We give God thanks for His faithfulness! Surely, you and I can sing together at the end of the year 2015: Great is Thy faithfulness, O God, my Father!

Christ's kingdom. We have been called out of darkness where we are alienated from God and His Son and into the fellowship of God and Christ. We have been called out of those cast away in God's wrath and into the very family of God Himself. We are become the sons and daughters of the living God. God has adopted us in the blood of Christ. He loves us and establishes us in His household and family.

Now, the point is here: will God, once He has adopted us to be His very own children, cast us away? Will God, who has called us out of this present world and through the gracious work of salvation made us into His very own children, now turn us away? Paul says that God will also *do it*, that is preserve us blameless because we are His children whom He will never forsake. If He were to forsake us, it would militate against the very work of salvation itself. God will indeed complete the work of salvation in us because we are His children. We have been chosen from eternity in God's counsel, and for that reason we are called out of this world of sin and unbelief. God has for the sake of Christ made us into His very own children. And once a child of God, always a child of God. God says to us, You need never fear, little child of mine. I will never leave you nor forsake you. You are called according to my purpose. You are mine and I will not allow

anyone to pluck you out of my hand! I will be your guide even unto death! Do not worry: I have begun a good work in you and I will indeed complete it. How we rejoice in that grace God has shown us in our lives!

All of this, everything we have been talking about, culminates in one word, saints of God: Faithful. You notice how this term is the very first word of our text? That is because it is to receive all the emphasis. Paul does not write, "He is faithful who is calling us." Paul writes the term "faithful" first—that is because everything found in this verse that we consider is wrapped up in that one word. A person who is faithful keeps his promises. He does not waver one way or the next. He is a man of his word. One who is faithful does not change his mind, but is constant and sure. God is faithful in the highest sense of the word. And that because God does not change. He is immutable. God's immutability or unchangeableness is one of God's attributes. It is that which makes God, God. It is who He is. That means that when God makes a promise He cannot break it. When God performs a work, He does not turn from it. Now, God has made us a promise, fellow believers. It is the promise of His covenant. God has in His friendship with us and favor toward us promised us that we will be heirs of His

know they knew nothing about then, can a woman conceive a child in her womb. The story cannot be true. And because of this view of unbelief, many in the church too will deny the virgin birth. It is not necessary to believe that Christ is born of a virgin, they say. It is not necessary to believe the virgin birth in order to believe that Christ is our human/divine Savior. Do away with this miracle! We do not wish to embarrass ourselves in the face of modern science! It is but a heartwarming tale!

But the verse we consider today does not leave us with that impression. And, I suppose, if we believe that the Bible is not God's Word, then we need not believe it. But if we believe that what is contained in the Bible is indeed the very Word of God—the infallible, authoritative Word of God—then we *must* believe the passage we have before us! Read it! "Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise: When as his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost." Before this man and woman came together. Before they knew each other in that intimate way of a husband and wife, Mary was with child. Mary was a virgin! Mary recognized this too when the angel announced the conception of Christ to her in Luke 1:34: "Then said Mary unto the angel, How

shall this be, seeing I know not a man?" Mary had known no man, and the fact that she was a virgin is a sign to you and me of the greatest of all miracles, fellow believers! We may not take away the virgin birth!

The virgin birth is a sign that truly Christ is the Son of God made flesh! This is supported by the end of our text: "she was found with child of the Holy Ghost." She was not found with child of Joseph, she was not found with child of a man, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost. The Holy Spirit, the third Person of the Triune God to do that work of God. The power of this Holy Spirit overshadowed Mary, and that small ovum inside of her was given life. In very simple language, that seed in Mary was human because it was the seed of a woman, but when it was given life, that baby became divine. God became the Father of that child. Joseph was always viewed by others as Jesus' father. But Joseph was not Jesus' father. God was! That is not hard to understand! Although beyond human imagination, it is not hard to understand the incarnation. The Bible recognizes this great truth everywhere. The scriptural account is consistent throughout: Jesus was born of a woman who was a sinner just as we are. Jesus assumed the human nature through Mary. He

was a man with the same weaknesses as a man. But He was also the divine Son of God—He had a divine nature that made Him sinless and all-powerful!

And it is that that we must notice in the verse we consider today too. Christ was all-powerful! He was powerful to save us from our sin. That is the reason we rejoice in Christ's incarnation. God made possible in Jesus Christ, through this miraculous conception, what was humanly impossible: deliverance from sin and hell. Jesus Christ was sent into this world as the highest act of God's love

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and grace toward His people! I know that the vast majority of the church world see Jesus as nothing more than this really really good man who did all kinds of nice things for people. That is not why Jesus Christ was born into this world, people of God! Christ was born into this world to save sinners! Notice why it was that Joseph was told, in verse 21, to name his child Jesus: "And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins." That is why the divine Son of God had to be born into our human flesh! This was the only way that salvation was possible—the only way! Jesus

was sent to secure that salvation for us.

You see, our sin is of such a nature that it alienates us from God. Sin forms a barrier that keeps us from God's favor and fellowship. Sin is this huge wall that shuts us out of heaven! And that is true of everyone without exception! All men in Adam are worthy of eternal punishment on account of sin. And no amount of good deeds is going to pay that price for our sin. No amount of good works is going to earn our

way into heaven. The simple fact is that we sinned, and that sin has to be paid for.

And we cannot pay for it. On the contrary, we daily add to our sin. Yet, we—that is, man—must pay for our sin if we are to escape hell and be received back into God's favor and fellowship again. We must bear the full burden of God's anger against our sin, we must pay the price of hell, if we are going to be received into God's favor. Simple fact. There is no way around it. We must suffer God's wrath in hell before going to heaven. Now, do you think you could do that? Do any of us here think we are able to bear God's wrath for a moment in hell and then come out of hell to experience God's favor again? If we think we as

will be faithful to complete it. We know He will.

II. Called

How can we be so certain of this at the close of this year? Paul gives us two reasons in our text. Number 1, God has called us. Number 2, God is faithful. Both of these we need to consider yet. First of all, God will indeed complete the work He has begun in us because it is God, after all, who has called us. There are many passages of the Bible that speak of the calling. This calling of God must be distinguished as the external call of the gospel and the internal call of the Spirit. Let me try to explain this a little more carefully. The external call of the gospel goes out to everyone where God in His providence guides it. This takes place through the preaching of the gospel by the church. The church of Jesus Christ is given the task to preach the gospel to all nations and peoples. The church fulfills this work by preaching both within the sphere of the instituted church as well as outside of it to others. Christ has commissioned the church to go out and call the nations to faith and repentance. The faithful church of Christ takes this work seriously. She therefore goes out and preaches to all people without distinction or prejudice. In this sense of the word, many are called. But

though many are called in the external way, only few receive the internal call of the Spirit in their hearts. Many are called but few are chosen, Christ informs us.

It is the intent of God, of course, by means of this external call to call to Himself only those whom He has elected unto eternal life. The Spirit of Christ works through this external call, irresistibly drawing unto God those whom God has chosen. In other words, the external call will only serve to harden those who are not also called internally by the Spirit of Christ. Those called internally by the Spirit are brought by God's grace to a knowledge of their sin and their guilt. They become acutely aware that they deserve the punishment of hell. They then, in the weariness and burden of their sin, hear the call to come to Jesus Christ and flee to Him to find rest unto their souls. The Holy Spirit powerfully works in their hearts and irresistibly draws them to the cross of Christ where they find their salvation. That is the calling of our text: the calling that God uses effectually to save His people. But we must also understand what God accomplishes in this calling. God's saints are called *out of* something and at the same time *into* something as well. God's people have been called out of the darkness of sin and unbelief and into the light of

God is faithful “who also will complete it.” But nothing is lost and everything is gained in the translation that we have here in our KJV, “who also will do it.” I like that. Plain and simple is the fact Paul relates to us: God has sanctified you and God will preserve you in that sanctification. Never fear: God will do it! We know He will because God has already done it in our lives. Think of the many times we have stumbled into sin. Think of the many times in this past year when if we were left on our own we would have forsaken all and left. Think of the times of despair when we asked ourselves, is all of this worth it? Think of the times when we, according to our sinful flesh, felt like running away and simply following after the ways of the world as if there was more joy to be found there. Think of the times when the temptations were so great that we would like to have walked in what was right in our own eyes? Yet, here we sit listening today to the Word of God that speaks of God’s faithfulness. Though we have stumbled and faltered along the way, God has done it. He has preserved us, has He not? Not because we have been so faithful

to Him. Not because we in some way have been able to make it on our own—in our own strength. But God has done it. We give credit where credit is due. God is faithful to complete that work that he has begun in us! He who began a work in you has been faithful to complete that work. In all of His children, in you and in me too! And it is in this that we rejoice.

We rejoice in this too: God *will* do it. God *will* preserve us in His grace. He *has*. We experienced that in our lives, but we are confident at the end of this year that God *will* in the days to come preserve His people blameless unto the coming of Jesus Christ. We do not fear. We do not waver. God has preserved us and God will preserve us. He will be our guide even unto death.

*He will be our guide
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That is an established fact
in the heart of every believer
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That is an established fact in the heart of every believer as we stand on the brink of a new year and face such an uncertain future. We say that even in the face of the difficulties we will experience in our lives in this new year to come. We say that in the face of all our struggles, in the face of all the temptations that will confront us, in the face of our own sinfulness: He who has begun a good work in us

men have the power to endure that wrath of God, we are sadly mistaken.

God’s wrath is an eternal wrath! If I were to pay the price for one of my sins alone, I would have to suffer God’s wrath to an eternity! I would never be able to suffer it in a moment and then escape it the next. God’s wrath is eternal, and therefore punishment is eternal! The only man that is able to bear God’s eternal wrath and then live to come out from under it is one who is Himself very God! Only one who is divine would be able to bear the eternal weight of God’s anger! This is why the virgin birth is so, so significant! By means of this miraculous conception of Christ He became man. As man He was able to bear the sins of men. He was a fit representative of man being a man Himself. But Christ was also God, who was able to bear the burden of God’s wrath against our sins and be able to deliver us from them! Christ had to be God. If He were not God, then we are still lost in our sins. The price would not be paid. Being God, Christ was all powerful to pay the price of sins and to deliver God’s people from them! We may not deny the virgin birth then! To deny it is to deny our own salvation! That then is why we rejoice

in the miraculous conception of Christ. It is a wonder of all wonders!

III. A Promised Messiah

The Messiah was born just as God had promised. God made possible in His birth what was humanly impossible: our salvation! All according to His promise. Follow the generations of Christ in the Old Testament. He was sent out of the line of Abraham and David. He came. Our text tell us: the birth of *Jesus Christ* was on this wise. The birth of whom? The birth of *Jesus*—the one who has come to save His people from their sins. But, more importantly, the birth of *Christ*. There is the Greek word for the Hebrew name, Messiah! The Messiah had been promised for centuries! Ever since the fall of man into sin. God’s faithful people in the Old Testament looked for and longed for the coming of their Messiah, their Christ. His line can be traced through the line of God’s covenant! And now He has come—just as God had promised He would. And our Savior, whose birth we commemorate, is strong to save! God has made our salvation possible in Him. How? Because He is Immanuel: God with us!

THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR

*December 13, 2015
No. 3806*

*The Naming of John
Rev. Wilbur Bruinsma*

Dear Radio Friends,

Introduction

Sermons on John the Baptist's birth usually center on the events of the miraculous appearance of the angel to Zacharias in the temple, the doubts of this aged priest, and that he was left unable to speak. But the events of Luke 1:57-66 are not as often considered. These events surround John's circumcision. We take time to read these verses in Luke 1. Verses 57-66:

Now Elisabeth's full time came that she should be delivered; and she brought forth a son. And her neighbors and her cousins heard how the Lord had showed great mercy upon her; and they rejoiced with her. And it came to pass, that on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child; and they called him Zacharias, after the name of his father. And his mother answered and said, Not so; but he shall be called John. And they said unto her, There is none of thy kindred that is called by this name. And they made signs to his father, how he would have him called. And he asked for a writing table, and wrote,

saying, His name is John. And they marveled all. And his mouth was opened immediately, and his tongue loosed, and he spake, and praised God. And fear came on all that dwelt round about them: and all these sayings were noised abroad throughout all the hill country of Judea. And all they that heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, What manner of child shall this be! And the hand of the Lord was with him.

Today we wish to consider these verses. Elisabeth, soon-to-be mother of John the Baptist, was barren and old, but miraculously had conceived a child. It was odd, and everyone knew it, that an old lady of this sort was now walking about large with child. It was a strange sight that left many people wondering and marveling. But it was true. No one could deny it: Elisabeth was going to have a baby. The news was already traveling through the hill country of Judea where Zacharias and Elisabeth lived.

Many were beginning to take note of this, asking, What

and continue to depart from the truth of God's Word and to walk in the ways of the wicked. Is it even possible that God will preserve His elect?

I mean, Christ Himself teaches us that the tribulation of the last days will be so great that God will shorten the days of this world for the elect's sake. Or again, false prophets, that is, heretics will show themselves in the church, deceiving many, in so much that, if it were possible, they would deceive the very elect! These are dire predictions for the future. What will become of the church of Christ? Will she perish?

This is why it is Paul's prayer for the church that God will preserve our bodies, souls, and spirits blameless. You see, God has sanctified us wholly, as believers. He has through the work of Christ on the cross cleansed us of our sin and delivered us from corruption. This benefit He earned for us through His all powerful work on the cross. And this benefit He has applied to each of His chosen people through the work of the Spirit in our hearts. The Spirit of Christ was sent forth to dwell within us and to work in us the holiness that Christ has earned on the cross. The Spirit cleanses us in that blood of Christ, so that in our thoughts, affections, and intentions we are delivered from corruption and are now pure.

We are those who, through the work of Christ within them, have become dedicated and consecrated unto the service of God in this world. Because of that work of Christ, we have become blameless before God. We are those who seek God's will and desire that God's kingdom come.

Paul reassures us in our text that God who has sanctified us will not now give us over into sin. God will not, and has not in this year gone by, allowed His people to fall away from Him. He has preserved them. After sanctifying His people He does not turn them loose, so to speak, so that now they are on their own. He does not perform a work of salvation and then say to us, "Okay, the rest is up to you. You have to do the rest." Salvation is of the Lord. All of it is, from beginning to the end. And that work of salvation does not cease until every saint of God is glorified. Our assurance at the close of another year is this: God completes the work of sanctification. He cleanses us in the blood of Christ and He preserves us in that sanctification, even, mind you, causing us to grow in sanctification unto the very coming of Jesus Christ!

Notice the word of certainty in that last phrase of our text: God will do it. I like how short and concise that is. Literally, the word "do" ought to be translated as "complete."

as a fitting conclusion to them all. There is no need to fret and worry over the affairs of life, as we wait for Christ's coming. God is faithful who has called you. We do not close out another year of life with unrest, doubt, fear, and anxiety in our lives. God will indeed preserve you and me blameless unto the coming of Christ. There is no need for the church or God's people to fear. With that assurance we usher out the old year.

GOD'S FAITHFULNESS

I. Preserved

To understand the verse before us correctly we must read it in connection with the verse that precedes it. I say this because at the end of our text we read the phrase, "who also will do *it*." The question is, of course, what is this "it" that God will do? The answer lies in verse 23. There Paul

writes, "I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." That preservation is what is referred to by the "it" at the close of our text. In other words, we would read the verse we consider today in this way, "Faithful is God who calls you, who also will of a surety preserve you body,

soul, and spirit!" In short, our text today expresses the certainty of what Paul prays for in verse 23. There he prays that God will preserve these saints. In our text Paul says, "I do not fear that God might not preserve you, because God is faithful who has called you and God will do it." Our text is a statement of fact, a certain undeniable fact: God who has sanctified His people will preserve them in that life of sanctification unto the very coming of Jesus Christ. That expression of certainty is what believers need to hear in these perilous times.

We live in the last days. The passing on of an old year reminds of that. Christ is coming. And that means we live in dangerous days. We live in days when Satan and this wicked world have intensified their battle against the church. The unbelieving society in which we

live is making it more and more difficult to take a stand on the basis of God's Word. As the coming of Christ approaches, the temptations to stray from Christ and His kingdom increase. The pressure upon the church becomes stronger. Christ Himself asks concerning these last days, "will there be faith left in the earth?" So many have departed

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manner of child shall this be? Six months into Elisabeth's pregnancy the angel Gabriel was again sent forth by God. This time he was given the task of announcing the birth of Christ, the Messiah, to Elisabeth's cousin. This was a young virgin maiden who lived in Nazareth. Mary was given the news that she was going to give birth to the very Son of God. Upon her conception she hurriedly went to visit Zacharias and Elisabeth. Mary stayed with them for three months. We can only imagine what was the main topic of their conversations with each other. But now Elisabeth was full term and about to be delivered. Mary therefore returned to her home in Nazareth. Elisabeth then gives birth to her child, a son—just as God had promised! The relatives were all around and rejoicing with her and Zacharias. This set the stage for the events we consider today. Though these events surround the naming of John, we will soon find that this Word of God speaks to us of Christ and our salvation.

THE NAMING OF JOHN

I. A Family Dispute

After Elisabeth's full term was up, we are informed in verse 57, she delivered a son. What is striking is that her friends, neighbors, and relatives (our translation says cousins) were all on hand for this joyful occa-

sion. They would be there, of course, for this was no ordinary birth. Elisabeth was very old, remember, and it was amazing that she would even have the strength to bring forth a child. But all went well for her, and she gave birth to a healthy son. It was the custom among the Jews that the naming of a son must wait until the day of circumcision—an event that must take place, according to the law, eight days after the son was born. You see, circumcision was a sign of God's covenant with His people. To Abraham God had spoken the great words of His covenant: I will be your God and you shall be my people. By means of this covenant, God entered into a bond with Abraham in which God told Abraham that Abraham was His friend and that God would never forsake him in all his needs and cares. As a sign of this covenant, circumcision was instituted, and Abraham and Sarah were required to have their sons and household circumcised.

With this command also was the command to circumcise every male child born into the family at eight-days old. This latter command was given because God intended to carry on this covenant with Abraham's generations. So, not only must Abraham circumcise his children, but his children and his children's children in their generations must also do

the same. This signified that God would be a God not only to Abraham but also to his believing children after him in their generations. And it was this same sacrament that Zacharias and Elisabeth had to administer to their new son, because of their faith in the covenant that God had established with them.

And just as oftentimes our family and friends come to witness the baptism of our infant children for the same reason, so also was the family around then too. Besides, it seems as if they were included somewhat (at least in making suggestions) in the naming of the child. It was over this that there arose a dispute.

If you read Luke 1 you will find that an angel had told Zacharias that he was to name his son John. This was not an uncommon Hebrew name. But it *was* uncommon in the particular generations of Zacharias. No one in his family line was called by that name. Zacharias, no doubt, had already told Elisabeth long before John was born what they had to name their child.

Elisabeth knew, therefore, just as much as did Zacharias that their son was to be called John. But the relatives and neighbors did not. They all gathered around and without hesitation they began to call the baby Zacharias, after his father.

It was then that Elisabeth answered them firmly, “not so; but he shall be called John.” If we were to translate this literally, we would read, “No indeed; on the contrary, he shall be called John.” Elisabeth was firm therefore. But, it seems, so were the relatives. They answered Elisabeth, “There is none of your kindred that is called by that name.” Then they tried to bypass Elisabeth by going directly to Zacharias. Surely he would agree with them. So, they made signs to Zacharias. Somehow, by means of hand gestures or such like, they inquired of him what he would have the baby called. Zacharias had a small slate or writing tablet near at hand for conversing. This he now used to confirm what his wife had already said: “his name is John.” Everyone marveled, but husband and wife were agreed. John, therefore, became their son's name at the time of circumcision.

Now, there has to be something to that name John that is of significance here at this point. I mean, why would the angel specifically instruct Zacharias and Elisabeth to name their son John? There were plenty of other Hebrew names that had special meanings and significance. But God had chosen for this son of Zacharias the name John. This forerunner of Christ was not to bear an ordinary name. Quite simply, that name

THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR

December 27, 2015
No. 3803

God's Faithfulness
Rev. Wilbur Bruinsma

Dear Radio Friends,

Introduction

It is the close of the old year. There are many events that have taken place once again in this year gone by. There are political events that have changed the shape of our country. Immorality has become a common and accepted part of society. There are events that have gone on in the realm of the church. Apostasy abounds the more as the false church grows in strength. At the same time, however, the gospel has reached even more parts of this world. There are events that have transpired in our families—some we rejoice in and others cause grief and sorrow. There are events that have taken place in our own individual lives. Again, some we rejoice in and others, such as our battle with sin, cause us sorrow.

This may have been a good year for us and it may have been a bad year. But there is one certainty for God's people: God has been faithful to His promises to them. God's promise to you and me as believers is sure: I will never leave you or forsake you. Such is what we call our

attention to today too—not all the distressing things of life, but to God's faithfulness. We do that by considering the Word of God in I Thessalonians 5:24: “Faithful is he that calleth you, who also will do it.” This verse is a short one and does not really direct our attention to much else other than that God is faithful. It is a fitting one, therefore, as we contemplate the end of another year.

The apostle Paul in this letter that he writes to the Thessalonian church concerns himself with the second coming of Christ. And again, here is a concern that we all have too, as we stand at the close of an old year and the outset of a new. Paul reminds the saints that the day and hour of the second coming of Christ no man knows. It comes as a thief in the night. In the closing verses of I Thessalonians 5 and of this letter, Paul gives a number of short exhortations. All these were meant to admonish the Thessalonian believers in the way they ought to live as they waited for that coming of Christ. The verse we consider today comes at the end of these admonitions—and that

to die, that through His death He might overcome the devil and our sin. By dying, Christ set us at liberty to serve God in heart and soul. And through that work He has been exalted in the highest heaven, there to rule over this world as the King of Israel—His church! We rejoice in this King!

But there is something more too! We rejoice in the fact that this Christ is born in the very heart of the covenant! He was born right out of the midst of the church—at the very heart and center of all of history. He is of the flesh of His mother, having a central human nature. He is one of us. He is chosen of God

to be the King of God's church and to represent before God His elect people. Born at the heart of the covenant line, Christ has come to redeem all those who belong to the covenant. Christ is the very reason God's people are able to share in fellowship with God! Without Christ there would be no covenant and its blessings. By this journey to Bethlehem God has effected the very salvation of His people!

III. The Joy

The account of Christ's birth gives God's people great joy. This was the purpose of God

from eternity in bringing our Savior to the town of Bethlehem. He who was to be our King had to be born there. We find our joy in the baby born in Bethlehem. Who can say that they do not joy in this? This blessed truth needs to be deciphered from the superficial hype and vain tradition of this season. When it is, it does not take much to find the true joy that belongs to every believer! In the city of David is born our Savior, which is Christ the Lord—the Lawgiver of Israel, Shiloh. Here is the Seed of Abraham in whom all of true Israel is seen. We together with Him are God's sons. And God loves us in Him and God protects us in Him.

By this journey to Bethlehem
God has effected
the very salvation
of His people!

God is jealous of us! We belong to Him. What greater joy can there be?

We have fellowship with the ever blessed God of heaven and earth. The church of Christ throughout the world rejoices in that! The rift is healed. The covenant and its promises are secure. We are God's people and He is our God! Who will ever separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord? Unto us a child is born. Unto us a Son is given. See him? He is there in that manger of Bethlehem. Jesus Christ, our King! Let us bow down before Him and worship Him!

John means, "Gift of Jehovah." But the idea of gift here speaks of a gift of God's grace, that is, a gift freely given and not on the basis of merit. So the name John means "Jehovah has graciously given." Now, no doubt, in the first instance, this name has reference to what God had done for this aged priest and his wife. God had graciously given them a son. In their old age, when it was impossible, God had yet favored them by giving to them a son.

So this is true first of all. But we may not forget the significance of John the Baptist in his life and work. He was not born to receive the attention or the fame. As he said later in his ministry to his disciples about Jesus, "he must increase, but I must decrease." God had sent John into this world in order to prepare the people for the coming of the Messiah. Even in his birth and in his name, this was the great and grand purpose God would have him fulfill. The name John, therefore, pointed God's

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people *then*, as well as you and me *today*, to the coming Messiah. And when we understand that, then we begin to see the gospel in the account before us.

Christ is that one whom

God has graciously given to us. John's name does not extol John himself, therefore. It extols God for the gracious gift given us in the birth of His Son Jesus Christ into this world. Now, this points out to you and me two things with respect to the birth of Christ into this world.

The first is this: Christ's coming is a gift. Paul writes of Christ in II Corinthians 9:15: "thanks be unto God for his unspeakable gift." Now, we well know what a true gift is. It is something we simply give to another person with no strings attached. The world has lost that idea of a gift, it seems—greed oftentimes becomes the motivation behind the giving of a gift. Gifts are given in order to gain favors of another person or in order to get something back from them. But that is not the true nature of a gift. A gift is something that I would freely

give to another simply because I am inclined in my heart to give. This is the gift that God has given to you and me in Christ. In all reality, God

looked down upon His chosen people and saw their sad estate. He saw us in our sin. He saw the misery such sin caused us. He saw us as we pined away in our sin. He heard our groans and our cries to Him for deliverance.

God took pity on us and in His great mercy He has sent to us the most blessed of gifts: His Son.

But to understand this gift of God's Son we must understand too why Christ has come into this world. This Paul explains for us in Romans 5:14-16:

Nevertheless death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over them that had not sinned after the similitude of Adam's transgression, who is the figure of him that was to come. But not as the offence, so also is the free gift. For if through the offence of one many be dead, much more the grace of God, and the gift by grace, which is by one man, Jesus Christ, hath abounded unto many. And not as it was by one that sinned, so is the gift: for the judgment was by one to condemnation, but the free gift is of many offences unto justification.

The free gift that we receive of God is in all reality justification! Christ was born into this world for the express purpose of giving His life as a sacrifice for our sins. And that is the gift of God to us in Christ. God saw that death reigned over us in Adam. We were all guilty of condemnation before Him. We had sinned against the most high majesty of God. We were alienated from

God. But God commends His love toward us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us. In this death of Jesus Christ we are freely given by God not only deliverance from guilt and punishment, but also life eternal. That is God's free gift to His elect people everywhere.

That gift was given *graciously* by God. It was not a gift that we merited. It is not a gift that God gives to those who deserve it. It is not a gift that God gives to us because He thinks that we are more worthy of it than someone else. It is a gift given to His people in His sovereign, uninfluenced love and favor toward His people in Christ! This is why this tiny infant born to Zacharias and Elisabeth must be called John, because Jehovah in His faithfulness to His church has graciously given to us salvation in Jesus Christ.

II. A Loosed Tongue

The relatives and neighbors of Zacharias were either present or surely had heard of the events in the temple when the angel had appeared to Zacharias to announce John's birth. They were witnesses to the strange occurrence of Zacharias being struck dumb by the angel. They knew therefore that Zacharias' inability to speak was something imposed upon him by the angel. God had done this.

had His own divine reason that Christ should be born in Bethlehem. That this is true is revealed in prophecy itself. The journey was made to Bethlehem in direct fulfillment of the prophecy of Micah 5:2, "But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting." Notice the description of Christ here. He is to be the Ruler of Israel!

This touches exactly on the truth that Christ is born out of the royal line of David. Christ was to be the royal seed. He was born not only out of the line of David but also out of the line of Judah. To Judah the promise had been given, in Genesis 49:10: "The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh come; and unto him shall the gathering of the people be." Christ was to be this lawgiver! Christ would wield the scepter of a king! Christ is the Shiloh who was to come! Christ, therefore, must needs be born in Bethlehem because this was a sign of His royalty!

It was a sign of His kingship. How so? Bethlehem was

the birthplace of the great king! What great king? David! He was the great king that brought Israel to its peak of power and glory. But was David the greatest of all the kings that was to rule over Israel? God's people knew better. Even the wicked, unbelieving Jews knew better. Bethlehem would be the birthplace of the greatest of all the kings of Israel.

*Bethlehem would be
the birthplace of the
greatest of all the kings
of Israel.
It was to be the birthplace
of Shiloh, the Messiah!*

It was to be the birthplace of Shiloh, the Messiah! Though no one was watching Bethlehem anymore, though no one

was even watching the line of David anymore, the knowledge was still there that this was to be the birthplace of the Messiah. This journey to Bethlehem speaks to us of Christ's kingship over His church, a kingship that had been prophesied already when Jacob spoke his blessing on his son Judah.

You see what we rejoice in as believers? Christ is born our King! He is born to rule over His church. This is not merely a poor little boy born in a barn, whose bed was a feeding trough for animals. This is our King that we see born here! He was born in order to conquer our mighty enemies. He was born to set us free from the slavery that has held us! He was born in order

therefore the Samaritans were hated by the Jews. A good Jew traveled, therefore, around the outskirts of Samaria along the Jordan River. Probably after three days Joseph and Mary made Bethlehem, and there almost immediately gave birth to their Son. He was not born before leaving Nazareth. He was not born en route to Bethlehem. He was born only after arriving in Bethlehem. And all of this, as we will find, has its significance! Such was the journey.

II. The Reason

Now, there was an important reason for this journey. It is true that, when we look at the events that surrounded Jesus' birth, we can find any number of human reasons for this journey. The first reason lies in the fact that Caesar Augustus, the emperor of the Roman Empire that included Palestine, sent forth a decree. He was going to tax the world. But in order to make this tax effective and lucrative, Caesar first of all required everyone of the various nations of his realm to register for the tax. It was not much different than it is now in our own United States. We too must be registered, for example, to vote. Caesar sent forth a decree that all the world at that time should register for the tax. And it was at that particular time in the life of Joseph and Mary that they by

law had to register. But that was not so simple. Among the Jews anyway, it was felt that the best way to register for this tax was by going back to the town of their lineage. And since all good Jews could trace their lineage back to the time of David when the kingdom of Israel was organized under him, everyone was required to go to the town their ancestors lived in during this time. Obviously, for Mary and Joseph this was Bethlehem and not Nazareth. Bethlehem was the city of David—the place where David had been born and anointed as king. So this was a second reason Joseph and Mary had to make this journey.

They knew no more. To all intents and purposes these two lowly people knew no more. They knew of no other reason for them to travel to Bethlehem. In other words, they did not know that this was the place that Christ *had to be born*. They did not say to themselves, "Well, the Messiah has to be born in Bethlehem because he is a royal descendant of David." They did not reason, "We had better hurry off to Bethlehem because the Old Testament Scriptures say that this is where our son has to be born." It was these earthly reasons alone that brought them on their journey. Everything was done innocently enough by this man and his wife.

Yet behind all of this, God

All of them were fully aware of this. But none of them expected that at this particular moment when Zacharias wrote, "his name is John," his tongue would be loosed. His speech returned as suddenly as it was taken

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away—but this time in the presence of witnesses. No one could doubt that a miracle had been performed here. No one could doubt that this son of Zacharias was going to play a special part in the coming of the Messiah. The moment Zacharias' tongue was loosed he spoke words of praise to God.

To praise is to extol the virtues of another. It is to testify to, to call attention to the name and goodness of another. These praises Zacharias lifted, we are told, to God in heaven. Zacharias extolled the name of God. He directed the attention of his listeners to the gracious hand of God in his life and theirs. Those praises are recorded for us in verses 67-80 of this chapter. Now we do not intend to explain these verses in detail, but there are two outstanding truths that stand out in his praise.

The first is this: that of God's faithfulness to His people.

This truth is implied in the name Jehovah. John' name means "*Jehovah's* gracious gift."

This name of God is significant. Jehovah is the name of our God that distinguishes Him from all other gods. That

name means "I am." It calls our attention therefore to the changelessness of God. He is! Not was or will be. He is. As such He is ever the same—yesterday, today, and forever He changes not. He has purposed all things in eternity, and from that plan He does not waver. Zacharias says in his praises in the verses following John's circumcision that God sent Jesus in order to perform the mercy promised to the fathers and to remember His covenant sworn by oath to Abraham. With that covenant many promises were given to God's people of old. God would give to them the land of Canaan and would increase their number as the sand is by the seashore. Those same promises we receive today as the spiritual children of Abraham, those characterized by the same faith as Abraham. We are promised the heavenly Canaan, and that we will stand there with a multitude so large that no man can number it.

From these promises God has not wavered. He is Jehovah. He changes not. And it is a good thing. Even as believers we sin against God over and over again. We do not think so highly of ourselves as to think we are without sin, do we? Well, sin acts as a barrier that keeps us from sharing in the friendship and fellowship of God—the blessings of God's covenant. And if God were not faithful He would long ago have forsaken His people. But He has not. And He has not because He has sent Jesus Christ into this world in order to maintain His covenant. Christ, in paying the price of sin, has removed our guilt and restored us into the fellowship and favor of God.

Zacharias recognized this. He therefore praised God that God had chosen at this time in all of history to remember His covenant in sending forth His Son.

And that is the second great truth that Zacharias praises God for: the coming of the Messiah. Again, Zacharias' attention is not focused on John himself. It

is focused on the great work God had sent John to do. John was sent to prepare the way for Jesus. The praise that Zacharias raises at this point was for the coming of the Messiah. These are the praises we raise today too, fellow saints. We praise

*We praise God
for His faithfulness to you and me
in sending Christ.
We praise God that He has made
our salvation possible
through the Son of His love.
And we rejoice
in what God has done in the birth
of our Savior into this world.*

God for His faithfulness to you and me in sending Christ. We praise God that He has made our salvation possible through the Son of His love. And we rejoice in what God has done in the birth of our Savior into this world.

III. A Widespread Fear

This stands in keeping with the reaction of God's people then too. We learn in Luke 1:65, 66 of the reaction of those who now witnessed the events surrounding John's circumcision. The reaction first of all was that of fear. The fear of God came upon them all. The fear of God is good. More people should have a little more holy fear of God in their hearts today. Far too many make God out to be man's equal. Few any more view God as do the Scriptures: an all-consuming fire before whom we must bow

espoused or engaged. Mary was now Joseph's wife. We learn in Matthew 1:24, 25 that after the angel informed Joseph that the child conceived in Mary was the Son of God, he immediately married her. We read, "Then Joseph being raised from sleep did as the angel of the Lord had bidden him, and took unto him his wife." So Mary, to whom Joseph had been espoused but who was now his wife, traveled with Joseph. Now, as we mentioned, in the eyes of the world, even in the eyes of his fellow countrymen, the Jews Joseph and Mary were nobodies! No one took particular note of this journey they made.

But Luke informs us of something of great significance about Joseph. He was of the house and lineage of David! According to Luke 4, where the genealogy of Jesus through the line of Joseph is traced, we find that Joseph was a descendant of Nathan, who was a son of king David. What is more, we also learn in Scripture that Mary too was of the line of David, both parents were born out of David's line. Matthew 1 speaks of Jesus' lineage traced back through Mary to Solomon, who was the son of King David. In all reality then, Jesus was, by virtue of both of His parents, a Son of David—even a royal son of David. I realize there is some dispute over who it was that truly was a descendant of the royal line—Joseph or Mary.

I do not wish to enter into that debate. What is significant is that Mary and Joseph together represented the line of David.

Neither may we forget that Mary and Joseph were not alone in this journey. Mary was great with child. And, as we well know, this Child was Jesus Christ—the Savior. In this we find the significance of this journey. Christ was traveling from Nazareth to the town of Bethlehem! Christ was therefore a part of the lineage of both Joseph and Mary, legally Christ was represented by Joseph, and organically Christ was born out of Mary. That made Him personally of the house and lineage of David—legally and organically. As we said, this is of significance and this is what made the journey one to be remembered throughout the ages. We will come back to that in a moment.

These three left their home in Nazareth of Galilee and slowly made their way to Bethlehem in Judea. We say slowly because, number 1, Mary was great with child. Number 2, the only means of travel was by foot, or perhaps this poor peasant owned a donkey. Either way, the travel was slow. Number 3, a good Jew would never travel through Samaria, which lay between Galilee and Judea. The Jews considered the Samaritans to be a heathen people, and

captivity as God had promised some 70 years later it was here in Judah, now Judea, that they settled. Galilee at that time, however, was still inhabited by this foreign people. But during the 400 years between the Old and New Testaments this changed. During the reign of the Macabees the province that later was called Galilee was conquered and resettled by some of the Jews. But this settlement was not so pure. There was a mixture of foreign people and Jews. In fact, only few of the people in Galilee were purely Jew. This is why the inhabitants of Galilee pronounced words in the Greek a little differently than they did in Judea. This is also why the Jews in Judea were always suspicious of the orthodoxy of those Jews who lived in Galilee. The Jewish elite were found in Jerusalem. These felt that those of Galilee, being of mixed race, could not be trusted as far as their knowledge of Scripture was concerned.

We are told in verse 4 of Luke 2, however, that Joseph and Mary both were pure Jews who lived in the little country village of Nazareth in Galilee. This means that although they were of pure Jewish blood, they were, nevertheless, insignificant peasants who came from a village that never had received any attention in the entire history of the church in the Old Testament. Nazareth was a

little town tucked neatly in the hillsides of Galilee. It was not one of the busy sea coast towns of Galilee that were located on the shores of the Sea of Galilee.

Bethlehem was also just a little town. It too did not have any significance among the great and mighty cities of Judah. The only thing for which it was known—and this the inhabitants of the city clung to—was that the highly esteemed king David had been born there. But this fact had done little to increase the fame and popularity of this little town. It remained small and mainly the habitation of shepherds.

So we have a journey mentioned in our text from one insignificant village to another. This was a journey that attracted no attention at all. Two poor people traveling from one poor city to another. In the minds of men it meant nothing. Yet, according to the purpose of God, this was a most significant journey! And both the town of Nazareth and the town of Bethlehem are remembered to this very day by believers everywhere.

The significance of this journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem lies in the people who made this journey. Our text tells us that Joseph went up out of Nazareth with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child. Our text does not mean that as of yet Joseph and Mary were only

with fear and trembling. Do you mean we must be afraid of God? Those walking in sin ought to be afraid. But believers, understanding the power and sovereignty of God, bow before Him in the deepest of reverence and humility. There is a measure of trembling, but this comes from an overwhelming sense of awe over who God is. When we come into His presence, we come silently, fearing Him, holding Him in highest esteem and deepest reverence. That was the fear that fell upon God's people in the hill country of Judea. And in that fear they spoke with each other about the great things that were happening. Word spread throughout the hills.

In the second place, they laid up in their hearts what was going on. They believed. They

watched intently this son of Zacharias to see what manner of child he would grow to be. And what they saw was that the hand of God was with John. Already now before John even preached a word, his very birth made people look again in faith for the coming Messiah. Fear and faith is what John was called to work in the hearts of God's people—and in this way he would prepare the way for Christ.

Today we kneel before our God with fear and trembling that so great a God took pity on us in the misery of sin and would be pleased to save us. We humbly approach our God and praise Him.

And we lay all these things up in our hearts.

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THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR

*December 20, 2015
No. 3807*

*From Nazareth to Bethlehem
Rev. Wilbur Bruinsma*

Dear Radio Friends,

Introduction

The account of Christ's birth is, in the main, contained in the Gospel of Luke, chapter 2. None of the other Gospel accounts record for us that birth. Only Luke. The other accounts record other necessary information of events that surround the conception and birth of our Savior—but none of the others gives the actual account of His birth. There does not seem to be all that much information provided for us by the Gospel writers. Yet, the events of the birth of Christ can be looked at from so many different points of view that the story, though old, always seems new. Luke 2 records for us Joseph's and Mary's trip to Bethlehem. We read of the fact that Mary made this journey being largely pregnant with Jesus. We read of the taxes that had been leveled by Caesar Augustus and therefore of the reason Joseph and Mary had to travel to Bethlehem. All of these are well-known facts that even our young children can tell us.

But though the story is simple and though the story is an old one, the truths contained

in it are ever new. And for that reason what we learn today in Luke 2:4, 5 contains the eternal truth of God's Word. We read in these two verses, "And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:) To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child." This passage reveals to us that Christ is born out of the royal seed of David. We are not interested only in the events that surround the birth of Christ proper, therefore, but we are interested also in what they teach us about the royal seed of the covenant. That will be our emphasis today as we consider the birth of Christ.

**FROM NAZARETH TO
BETHLEHEM**

I. The Journey

In order to understand the journey that Joseph and Mary made we must visualize the division of the land of Canaan at this time. We read in verse 4: "And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of

Nazareth, into Judea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem." Not only are there two towns revealed to us in this verse, but two regions or provinces that divided the land of Canaan, namely, Judea and Galilee. To understand this division we must picture a map of Canaan (or Palestine as it was called then) in our minds. On the west was the Great Sea or the Mediterranean Sea. On the eastern border of these provinces was the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea, with the river Jordan running between the two. Galilee was the northern province, bordered on the east by the Sea of Galilee, on the north by the Syro-Phoenician province that was also under Roman control. On the southern border of Galilee, between it and Judea, lay the region known as Samaria. Samaria divided Galilee from Judea. Judea, then, was in the south of Palestine, and its eastern border was the Dead Sea and in part the Jordan River. The southern border was the wilderness, and, as was mentioned, the northern border was this region known as Samaria.

In order to understand this particular division of provinces we must understand somewhat the history of this region. In the Old Testament, the name Galilee applied only to a small region in the inheritance of Naphtali. The name itself has

no significance. It simply means "district." That is what it was, just a small district in the midst of Naphtali, possibly extending somewhat into the inheritance of Zebulun. Judea, on the other hand, was synonymous with Judah in the Old Testament—the nation of Judah in the south as opposed to the nation of Israel in the north. This area included a large portion of land in the south that included both the inheritance of Judah as well as that of Benjamin and part of Simeon. But all of this had changed drastically since the time of the captivity until the time of Christ's birth.

If you are at all acquainted with Old Testament history, then you will recall that the northern kingdom of the ten tribes had been taken captive by the Assyrian Empire. This empire removed all of the people of Israel from their inheritance, scattered them throughout the Assyrian Empire, and replaced them with foreign people. These people became known as Samaritans, named after the capital city of the nation of Israel, Samaria. None of them were Jews. But they began to mimic in a very loose way the religion of the Jews. Approximately 150 years later the Chaldean Empire took the kingdom of Judah captive to Babylon. But this empire left behind the poorer of the people to tend to the land of Judah. When the Jews returned from