



# “HE WILL BE GREAT”

## Luke 1:31-33

Paul J. Bucknell

- A. How did God get into the story?
- B. How did he set the POWs free?
- C. What happened to this war hero?

What does it take to be a great person? Some would say studying in America; others would say it is more important to study at a prestigious university. Others who are sport fans know it is having a certain physique as well as landing on a winning team. Others would say that it has to do with your family background. You understand, connections are everything. And inherited wealth gives one a great place to start. Undoubtedly, many other things are important to greatness. And most of us have given up in this pursuit for ourselves but still in our hearts are the glimmering hopes that our son might be great. We invest our lives into building a great person out of our children.

But this is only our normal human hopes and aspirations. What would happen to you if you heard someone come by at your baby's birth and say "He will be great" someday? You would smile and thank them for the compliment. But if another came and said the same thing. And then another. Maybe you would start thinking maybe he is destined to be great. This is similar to what happened many years ago to not as we would think a city girl, or even a rich country girl, but a young small town girl. Nor was it just an uncle or teacher who said these words to her newborn son, but an angel. Let me read to you the story as we have written by Dr. Luke, a well versed physician/historian. Luke 1:26-33 says,

*"Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city in Galilee, called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the descendants of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. And coming in, he said to her, "Hail, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was greatly troubled at this statement, and kept pondering what kind of salutation this might be. And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; for you have found favor with God. "And behold, you will conceive in your womb, and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus. "He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever; and His kingdom will have no end."*

The woman's name was Mary, somehow still a virgin. The announcer of her son's great future is none other than Gabriel, a powerful angel sent from God. In Luke 1:32 we find the phrase "He will be great." I know that though it sounds a bit odd at first yet we can readily accept it. After all, with the angels around, the wise men coming from the east bearing expensive gifts, etc., it all points to someone great. Jesus was this person. Jesus Christ is the One who will be great because He is great.

But this is too shallow of an understanding of the Christmas story to let it go unchallenged. For after all, it did say He will be great rather than He is great. Besides this there is some tension in the story due to where He was born and the whole awkward context. For us to understand Christmas, we must realize that though the statement of His coming greatness would come, it would not easily come to pass. Perhaps if success was easy, nothing would need to have been said. Everything would have become self-evident. But this is the puzzle of Christmas. Not much worked for this couple. Everything good became bitter. Perhaps if we saw Luke 1:31-33

"He will be great!"

their hard beginnings, their deprivation, persecution and shame, then maybe we would be more cautious in wanting greatness for our own children. Greatness has its cost. As He went through the adventures of life, He became great. I hope from this Christmas reflection that you and I will in a far greater way give Him the appreciation and honor that He deserves. This is the context of the precious verse in II Corinthians 8:9,

*“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich.”*

The greatness about the Christmas message is not the gifts and trees, or even the ornaments and the festal spirit. Oh yes, we can celebrate and be glad Christ Jesus came into the world. But it wasn't as if we were so great that He should feel obligated to come or that He being so poor would need that greatness. The opposite was true. We were not deserving of God's help nor He of needing the honor later given to Him. It is more like a spy story where the most gifted person in the multiple areas of strength, ploy, linguistic ability is to be airdropped into a nation that has captured some of his own nation's soldiers. His mission is to set them free. Being dropped in the darkness he hides as an undercover agent. Maybe he is a butler or a chauffeur, but he quietly plans and plots until the right time to spring the plan into action and set those captives free.

In Luke 1:31- 32 we have some significant clues to this whole plot. We have three questions to follow the process by which Jesus became great.

How did God get into the story?

How did he set the POWs free?

What happened to this war hero?

Here we have our own Christmas mystery set before us. How was God going to save man? God had to get into the world to get man out of the world alive. God had to work out a scheme in which God could free man. God would then both honor those captives set free as well as the one who saved them.

## **A. How did God get into the story? (Luke 1:31)**

### *Jesus Came Into the World*

One of the big questions about Christianity today is, “Why did God need to come to earth as a man?” The question is a good one. We don't easily understand His purpose. For example, many have said that Jesus Christ came to be a good example for mankind. Indeed He was but why was that needed? Why did He need to die? We should be greatly thankful that God understood and actually accomplished this task without our asking. This is the beginning of a descent pattern that we see in the life of Jesus. Leaving His eternal glory and power, the Christ came into the world born as a little baby in a very vulnerable context. Let's observe several different stages of this descent.

#### **First there was the God > God/man descent.**

This is the “rich became poor” concept. It is as if we took all our most prized things and gave them away and much more. Philippians chapter 2 captures this concept most powerfully. Philippians 2:3 - 7 says,

*“Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men.”*

Christ Jesus did not hold onto His divine powers and privileges as something that He had to hold onto. He voluntarily gave them up. By giving them up, we do not mean Jesus Christ was anything less than divine but that to become human several divine characteristics would need to

be hidden. This is the 'emptied Himself' or the 'taking the form of a bond-servant.' In other words, when He went from power and control to obedience and limitation, Christ Jesus was giving up something very significant. How many with doctorate degrees would like to go back to undergrad studies? How many fathers would easily jump back into being a young son in diapers?

We can sing "Joy to the world, the Lord is come," but we don't really understand its deeper meaning. God actually did come into the world. He hid His glory, restricted His access to divine knowledge and presence, and actually conformed Himself to be found in the likeness of man. If you do not understand God's overall plot of saving man, you will not be able to understand why this all had to be done.

### **Descent to being a baby.**

Mary was told she would conceive and bear a Son. This Son was supernaturally conceived by the Holy Spirit as foretold 600 years prior in Isaiah 7:14,

*"Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel."*

If this indeed was God coming into the world, then truly we should expect a special means of entering the world. One might call it even sneaky. We can see how the enemy sensed something going on. King Herod was out to kill anyone claiming to be king. He didn't like hearing about some special person whose kingdom would never end. He didn't like hearing that the prophecies of old were coming true during his reign.

But how would God become a man except through being a baby? There are other ways, no doubt. Why couldn't He be cloned or just appear with a body? The reason this was not done was that in order to carry out the plot and have all the prophecies fulfilled, Jesus would have to come from the descendants of David. Note Luke 1:27, "... a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the descendants of David; and the virgin's name was Mary." If one is to be a descendant of David, then He fairly enough needs to be of His family. Gabriel the angel knew this part of the plot. God would secretly enter the world through the miraculous conception.

But think of it. A baby. Being born as a baby. Of course He couldn't be born a little adult. It just wouldn't work even with modern surgery techniques. Christ Jesus had to be born as a little helpless baby. He wasn't just in the form of man but in the form of a baby. He wet His diapers, needed to be fed, held and cared for. Who among you as an adult would choose to be born again? Many who believe in the false teaching of reincarnation view birth as a form of judgment, their karma. This descent to be born a baby is a very humble step indeed. For Christ it was a humble way to become great.

### **Descent being from a 'bad' family.**

Joseph and Mary would probably never hear the end of the mocking. Having heard of her pregnancy, how many would have believed her story of a virgin birth? "Sure the angel talked to you!" they would mock. Joseph was going to break off his engagement with Mary because of her pregnancy until an angel spoke to him. If her fiancé being so close would reject her, think about everyone else in this small village who had no angels to tell them about Jesus' special birth arrangement. Being brought up in a scandalous family, though innocent of evil, is not easy. His entrance into the world had no royal flair.

### **Descent being on the go.**

First of all, we read that Joseph and Mary had to go to their family's home place to register. Both of them being of David's family, would need to go to slowly walk to faraway Bethlehem because of the emperor's edict. Here she gave birth on the run. As soon as she got to Bethlehem, she gave birth. Yes, it was predicted about 500 years before hand, but how difficult it was to travel so far when she was about to give birth. Micah 5:2-3 says,

*“But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, Too little to be among the clans of Judah, From you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, From the days of eternity. Therefore, He will give them up until the time When she who is in labor has borne a child. Then the remainder of His brethren Will return to the sons of Israel.”*

No conveniences. On the run. No help of neighbors. In fact there was no room in the local inn for them. They had the baby in a place where animals were kept and his crib was a manger trough, a place animals would eat straw from.

### **He also was being persecuted.**

King Herod in his jealous rage wiped out all the male children 2 and under in and around Bethlehem. Fortunately, shortly before this Joseph was warned and fled down and out the country as a refugee into the foreign country of Egypt taking Mary and baby Jesus.

### **Summary**

Isolated. Alone. Vulnerable. Uncared for. Rejected. Inhumane. Refugee. Persecuted. Homeless.

These all were the humble steps Christ Jesus was made to walk. To be made in the image of man was for Him the rich becoming poor. But this is an oversimplification of the things Jesus Christ really went through to get into this world. Everything was staged. The plan was set in ink and secretly revealed in a special code in the Old Testament scriptures where literally tens of scriptures were fulfilled in the matter of a very short time before and after His stealth entrance into this world.

### **Application**

Why would you criticize God for things that come into your life if He would call His own Son to go through such drastic steps? Don't you think if he would tolerate so much pain, misunderstanding and agony in the life of Christ to arrange the plan of salvation, that He would allow pain in His people to bring others into this plan of salvation? Let us put our pride away. There is no room for pride in the kingdom of God. In God's kingdom, there is too much love for any selfish rush to enjoy ease or pleasure. There is one strong message: the lost must be saved. If not, there would never have been such an infiltration of God into the world. There never would have been a Christmas.

## **B. How did he set the POWs free? (Luke 1:31)**

### *Jesus Came to be the Savior*

Jesus Christ's humility did not stop with His humble entrance into the world. To discuss the next big step down we must move onto this second point regarding the actual manner He would set these captives free. We find this stated in Luke 1:31 where we see Jesus' mission was embedded in His name. The word Jesus  $\text{Ἰησοῦς}$  is literally 'savior' or in an expanded version, 'Jehovah is salvation.'

Up until Jesus' time, Jesus was a common name given to Jews in Israel. The Hebrew word is 'Joshua' but transliterated into Greek it comes out to be 'Jesus.' Joshua is a type of Jesus going into the land under the obedience of God and conquering it for God's people. Listen to Matthew 1:21,

*“And she will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for it is He who will save His people from their sins.”*

Although we went to great length to cover the many steps down Christ Jesus needed to take to get into the world to carry out his rescue plan, this was merely the parachuting and the act of taking secret coverage. The plan was more grand than man's because it was God orchestrating it. However, we need to understand that the plan of God went deeper. Let us again listen to Apostle Paul in Philippians 2:8,

*“And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”*

The plan not only required the presence of the rescuer, the Savior. Christ became man. It also required His death. It was not good enough for Jesus to be a man or even a humble man. If this is all that was needed, then that would have been fine, but it wasn't. The reason is that these captives were totally given over to their enemy. They were fully guarded. They would have been killed if they heard of a plot. Or they would be destroyed if large missiles were used. They were wanted alive not dead. The only way was through a trade. Once they found that the chief general himself was the man sent on the rescue mission, being the only one who could get the job done, the enemy was willing to make a deal. They would let the prisoners go free if He would surrender His life to them. They thought, of course, that through Him they would get top secret information and conquer the whole land. The prisoners went free. Their life for His.

Some people think that Jesus was only hoping for salvation. But clearly the scriptures speak of His death being necessary and sufficient to actually set His people free. His death became salvation for His people. Their sins were taken away. They were released to be part of the kingdom forever.

Interestingly, at the very end of Christ Jesus' life, He met up with another Jesus. That was Jesus Barabbas. Jesus Barabbas was the captured robber whom the Jews wanted Pilate to release instead of Christ. Even this thief deserving of death was released because of the real Savior; Jesus Christ took the rap. The free became a slave; the living became the dead; the rich became very poor indeed.

### **Application**

What about you? Have you come to appreciate the work of Jesus on the cross? Have you personally believed in Christ Jesus and been released by that faith. It is like the enemy coming into your cell and telling them all that they were set free. They were to go. But you being afraid that they were trying to be sneaky and would kill him once out of the cell trying to escape, you never left. You don't know for sure the ability of Jesus Christ to save the lost. You fear what others might say. But what you need to know is the great love of God in Christ Jesus. If He would descend to save the lost, then you would be most foolish to turn away a freedom that your heart has been longing for.

## **C. What happened to this war hero? (Luke 1:32)**

### *Jesus Came to Rule Over All*

Finally in verse 1:32 of Luke we come back to the phrase “he will be great.” Perhaps now you understand why this statement is so spectacular. How can the greatest become great? How can the ruler of rulers become the ruler of His throne David? Let me once again read verses 1:32-33,

“He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever; and His kingdom will have no end.”

Four things are stated of Jesus Christ all with the purpose of defining the greatness He would gain.

- “He will be called the Son of the Most High; and
- The Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; and
- He will reign over the house of Jacob forever; and
- His kingdom will have no end.”

Compare this with the passage that we have following closely. Philippians 2:9-11 says,

*“Therefore also God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus EVERY KNEE SHOULD BOW, of those who are in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”*

The key to the whole operation was that though they would torture and finally kill this chief of generals, he actually would come back to life. The deal they thought was so secure became vain. The prisoners that believed left the cell for freedom. And this chief of generals was alive as ever. Jesus could not be kept dead because He committed no sin. Once the death was paid for our sins, then He was released to life again.

### **Application**

If we refuse such a wonderful salvation, where will we turn? If during this time of Christmas when we hear of such humility and gentleness, do we harbor unforgiving and bitter hearts?

### **Summary**

I would like to close with an emphasis on this theme “He will be great.” When we read Micah carefully, we actually find this same phrase “He will be great” there in verse 4. We actually see it many places but let me just read it here. Micah 5:2-5a says,

*““But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, Too little to be among the clans of Judah, From you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, From the days of eternity. Therefore, He will give them up until the time When she who is in labor has borne a child. Then the remainder of His brethren Will return to the sons of Israel. And He will arise and shepherd His flock In the strength of the LORD, In the majesty of the name of the LORD His God. And they will remain, Because at that time He will be great To the ends of the earth. And this One will be our peace.”*

In the Old Testament they could not understand fully what this meant. I hope we now do. I hope we can see that to become great, one must first become humble. If one wants to become very great and be of great service to God and mankind, then he needs to become very humble. We can easily desire our sons to be great leaders, but which of you would sacrifice his life to shame, infant-like helplessness, being a refugee, being poor, having a bad reputation, and being falsely accused to gain this ‘greatness’? Not our son. We would not. We could not. We rather have our sons live ‘normal’ lives. But in fact we all have gone astray; each to his own way. No one has gone the way of God. We deserve our own punishment. We deserve the shame from our immoral behavior. We deserve isolation and misunderstanding from the lies we have told our friends and enemies. It is we who should have suffered our wrong; it is our sons who likewise have done wrong like their fathers. We have compromised our integrity to get ahead and to advance. We want more money and a better place in life.

Christ Jesus came and gave up His life that so that we might be set free. It is God Himself who sent His only begotten Son to die for sinners and to set us free. He did become great because He was great. If there is such love, if there is such a grand plan of redemption, will you stay in your cell because of unbelief? Dare you stay alone when the Chief General Himself has come to set you free? Will you not come now to believe and follow the real “great One?!”