



## Nazareth— It's Your Home Too!

*By Desmond Ford*

*The new-born baby Jesus was totally dependent upon his heavenly Father. We must learn the lesson of completely depending on God.*



Malcolm Muggeridge, the well-known atheist who became a Christian, wrote many wondrously wise things. One of them is worth contemplating at Christmastime.

*"All creation, even our sins, everything that happens, all doing and considering, a leaf falling, a nuclear bomb exploding, the total experience of living, individually and collectively, carries God's messages, as it were, encoded. But we need the key to decipher them, to be able to decode them, and, of course, that key came to us in the Incarnation."<sup>1</sup>*





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between the first and the last events of  
the earthly life of our Lord.*

The word “incarnation” means the coming of God into the flesh and nature of humanity. This is accomplished through the miracle of the virgin birth. “The Word became a human being and lived here with us. We saw his true glory, the glory of the only Son of the Father. From him all the kindness and all the truth of God have come down to us” (Jn 1:14 CEV).

Muggeridge suggests that we use the incarnation key to unlock every mystery of common life. Because the incarnation reminds us of the birth of Christ, we might also call that key the Christmas key. Not that the **day** of Christmas is significant.

No one knows the exact birthdate of Jesus. But the event memorialized—the incarnation of God—that is what is important.

### **The Meaning of Nazareth**

Every jot and tittle associated with the story of our Lord’s birth is deeply significant. In this article we will dwell mainly upon the name of the tiny town where Jesus dwelt as a child (after his exile in Egypt). The humble town of Nazareth is commemorated in hymns, painting, and literature, as well as Holy Writ.

Many scholars agree that the name Nazareth comes from netser, the Hebrew word for “branch.” The root of netser is **nasar**. Nazareth was the place of branching shrubs and trees.

The prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Zechariah all foretold the coming of the Messiah by using the term, “branch” (Is 4:2; 11:1; Jer 23:5; 33:15; Zech 3:8; 6:12). The Messiah would be the Branch out of the stem of Jesse, the rod out of his roots. In other words, the Messiah would be a descendent of David. And the Messiah would come when David’s ancestral tree had diminished. It appeared to be a cut-down, barren trunk.

### **Meaning of Names**

To Hebrew people, names convey deep meaning. A name signifies character, whether it is the name of God, a new-born child, a place, or an event. Hundreds of examples could be given, but we will content ourselves with a summary drawn from the life of our Lord:



The bread of Life was first given to the world at Bethlehem, the House of Bread. The Man whose name is Netser, the Branch, grew up at Nazareth, whose name, derived from its branching shrubs and trees may have shadowed forth that circumstance in his life. He chose his Apostles to be fishers of men from Beth-saida, the House of Fishing. He dwelt at Capernaum, the town of Consolation. He healed the impotent man at Bethesda, the House of Mercy. Bethany, the place of Palm dates, speaks of the palms and hosannas of his triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, and of the victory and triumphal glory of his ascension. In Bethphage, the House of Figs, we may see a memento of the warning that he gave to Jerusalem and the world by the withering of the barren fig-tree. Gethsemane, the Press of Oil, was witness of his agony in which it pleased God to bruise him for our sakes that oil might flow from his wounds to heal our souls. God so ordered it that the cemetery of strangers at Jerusalem should, by its name, Aceldama, or Field of Blood, bear a perpetual record of the confession of Judas, and of the innocence of Christ—"I have sinned, in that I have betrayed the innocent blood." At Golgotha he rolled away our shame (Golgotha comes from a root signifying "rolling"), and on the mount of Olives Christ went up to heaven, whence he holds forth the olive branch of peace between God and Man. <sup>2</sup>

### Branches First and Last

There is an intimate connection between the first and the last events of the earthly life of our Lord.

He began life in a virgin womb cared for by a just man called Joseph. Forty days after emerging from that womb, baby Jesus was presented in the temple of the holy city of Jerusalem.

Come now to the end of his days. He enters a virgin tomb. It also is cared for by a just man called Joseph. Forty days after he leaves that tomb, he ascends to the temple of the heavenly Jerusalem, there to be presented as the victorious conqueror of the world.

The parallel is broader still. The messianic prophecies of Christ as the Branch are made prominent in the early narrative of our Lord's infancy (see Mt 2:23). Similarly, the same symbol becomes prominent in his teachings just prior to his death.

In John 15 we have part of Jesus' last discourse, within twenty-four hours of his burial. Listen to him:

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts away every branch of mine that does not produce fruit. But he trims clean every branch that does produce fruit, so that it will produce even more fruit. You are already clean because of what I have said to you.

"Stay joined to me, and I will stay joined to you. Just as a branch cannot produce fruit unless it stays joined to the vine, you cannot produce fruit unless you stay joined to me. I am the vine, and you are the branches. If you stay joined to me, and I stay joined to you, then you will produce lots of fruit. But you cannot do anything without me" (Jn 15:1-5 CEV).

### A Christlike Life

In these words, Christ challenges every believer to live a Christlike life, so far as is possible in sinful flesh. [Christ's humanity was true humanity, and only in the **likeness** (Rom 8:3) of sinful flesh, for he had no evil, fallen nature.] Again and again Christ testified that of himself he could do nothing. All his works depended upon his abiding in the Father. As Jesus is about to depart from this world, he invites us to know a similar relationship of trustful abiding. This way we can bear fruit to God's glory.

Our Lord was born of the Holy Spirit (Lk 1:35). We must be too (Jn 3:3). Jesus came into the world naked, just as every one of us does. This nakedness signifies his absolute dependence. It is the same in the continued daily life of the believer. While in Christ we are beautifully arrayed with his garments of perfect righteousness, in ourselves we are naked.

Luther said the Christian is always a sinner, always a penitent, yet always right with God. Because of our con-

tinuing weakness in ourselves, we are to learn to depend upon Christ for all. This is the relationship symbolized by the branch abiding in the vine.

The Christmas story, rightly interpreted, points to Passion Week. The "Branch out of the stem of Jesse" hung upon the tree of Calvary in a final spectacle of absolute dependence. Jesus is driving home his repeated lesson to his followers: if they would bear fruit, they must acknowledge their helplessness and abide in God.

### First Condition of Fruitbearing—Abiding

Christ, the Bread of Life, born in Bethlehem (which means "House of Bread,") is God's loaf. Christ is heavenly food to sustain and revive the lives of dying creatures.

Bread consists of many grains. It is significant that the term "Christ" is applied in the New Testament not only to our Lord but also to his corporate body, the Church (1 Cor 12:12). We are Christ's body.

Inevitably, we must have the same experience as our Head. Jesus had to abide in the Father in order to bear fruit. That abiding was as continuous as breathing from his earliest moments. It must be the same for every Christian, from the first moment of rebirth.

In John 15 the word **abide** occurs ten times in the first ten verses. Abiding is the first condition of fruitbearing. But there is another.

### Second Condition of Fruitbearing—Pain

Jesus tells us that it is impossible to bear fruit without pain. "Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit" (Jn 15:2 NRSV). We don't like being pruned. We don't like the heat of trial and trouble; but there can be no fruitbearing without it. Pruning weans us from our love of the evil in this world. Pruning drives us to study and prayer. Pruning unveils our own hearts to us and humbles us. It makes us empathetic.

There is no love that is not preceded by pain. A mother's love is preceded by the pain of childbirth. As the Christ child experienced poverty, rejection, and persecution from his birth, so it must be with all who claim to be



his followers. It is impossible to witness for God in a sinful environment without evoking opposition.

The Bethlehem story has, as one of its diamond facets, the vital truth of absolute dependence. What is more dependent than a new-born baby?

### Humility

Humility came naturally to the Christ child. Not so with us. Pride comes naturally to us. But to learn the lesson of dependence is to learn humility.

Karl Barth said that Christianity is grace, and ethics is gratitude. The Christian's humility springs not only from the fact that we are dependent, but also from the fact that we are forgiven. While Christ always did those things which pleased the Father, such is not true of any of us, however hard we try. Yet Jesus says, "You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you" (Jn 15:3 NRSV).

### Cleansing at the Well of Bethlehem

This cleansing reminds us of the well of Bethlehem (not the branch of Nazareth).

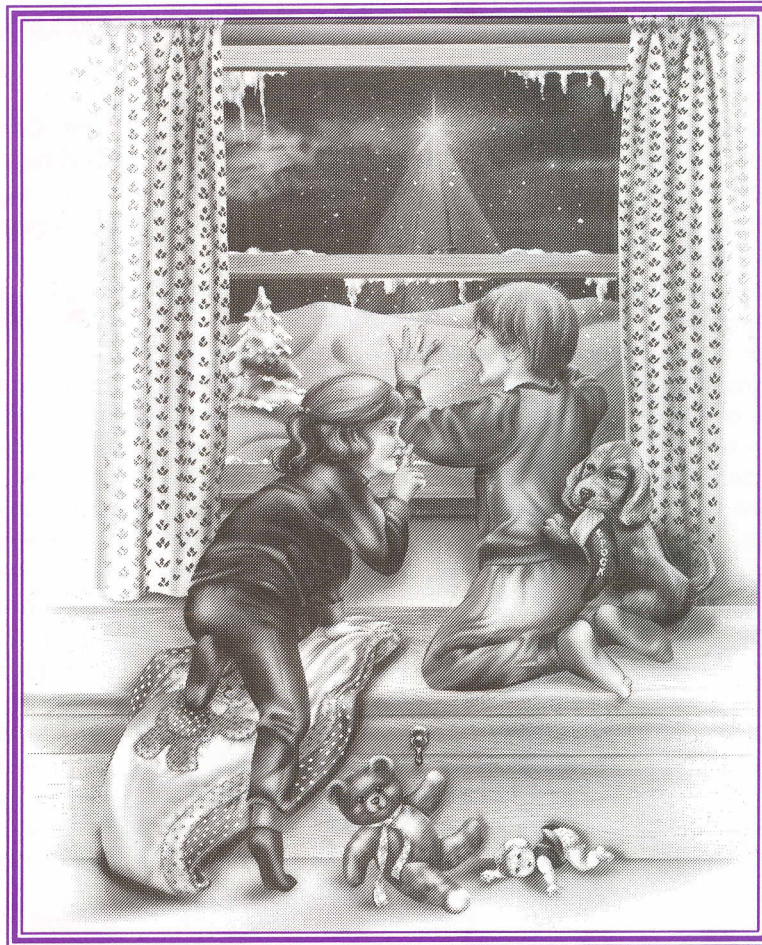
In Zechariah 13:1, we read that in the day of the Messiah "a fountain shall be opened for the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem to cleanse them from sin and impurity." This fountain is symbolized by the well at Bethlehem (2 Sam 23:15; 1 Chron 11:17).

Here is a beautiful combination of figures: Bethlehem points both to the bread and the water of life. Its name signifies House of Bread; and by its gate is the well, symbolic of the great cleansing fountain of the gospel.

It was a wonderful thing that the Son of God should stoop low to take humanity, and die for a race steeped in iniquity. In John 13, Jesus washes

the feet of his disciples. Minutes earlier these men had been quarreling and refusing to wash one another's feet. What a marvel that Christ could say to these men, "You are clean" (Jn 13:10)!

What a revelation of the heart of man and the heart of God! In the presence of Christ's sublime self-sacrifice, we (in our representatives, the dis-



ciples) quarrel and indulge in vanity, pride, and hate. But Jesus, blessed Son of God, stoops to wash our feet with water. This is symbolic of the cleansing of Calvary, soon to be accomplished. In anticipation of that atonement, Jesus says to sinners who yet love him, "You are clean." In forgiveness we find the spring of love and humility. It is forgiven souls who know they must abide in Christ, or shame him again. It is forgiven souls who experience humility and grateful love, and are enabled to bring forth fruit.

### Fruit of Obedience

More than ten times in his final

discourse, Christ mentions **obedience**.

The obedience of love is the real fruit which Jesus seeks. Whatever other fruit we bear, if the fruit of love is missing, all the rest is worthless. However clever we may be, however intelligent, however beautiful, however rich, however efficient and proficient in anything whatsoever, if the fruit of love is missing, all the rest is absolutely worthless.

True life is love, and love is life. Life begins as a result of love, just as the human race began because of the love of God, our Father. How we began in birth and rebirth should stamp all our later days.

The spring of love is to know that we are loved. No one ever loves Jesus Christ until convinced that Jesus Christ loves them. Love isn't something we invent; love isn't something we muster; love is a spontaneous result of being loved. There is no other way.

Bethlehem and Nazareth (and the Christmas story) are redolent with the love of God. But it is not just a cheering love. It is also a challenging love.

Jesus, the God-human, says to us, "I want you to reflect the sacrifice I made when I exchanged heaven for a manger. I want you to emulate the dependence I

voluntarily assumed in order to save you. I want you to love ungrateful, unholy, and evil humanity. I want you to so love humanity that the light might dawn that I have loved them with an everlasting love. I want them to see my love shining from the manger and the cross."

Here is one facet of the glory of Christmas! ❖

### Footnotes

1. Malcolm Muggeridge, *The End of Christendom*, p. 10.
2. Bishop Christopher Wordsworth, *Commentary on the New Testament*, 1:98.