

Reflections by the Pond

THE WRITINGS OF DAVID S LAMPEL



*After myriad prophecies dusted over by
time, after centuries of promises and un-
requited covenants, after generations of
painful expectation and longing—after all but
the most determined had given up hope...*

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What do you See?

THE SON OF GOD came to lowly earth as a helpless, mewling newborn: pink flesh and matted dark curls still wet from His indecorous entrance into a world of His own creation. A Jewish baby cast into not just a coarse home for beasts, but the coarse environment of hate and injustice, pain and inequities that was the Roman world of the first century. But there He was nonetheless. It was the time—the time of God’s own choosing. No matter what anyone else might think, it was the right time and place for Him to enter the world.

So what do you think? Every year as the Christmas holiday rolls around we are surrounded by both holy and crass reminders that Christ was born long ago in a Bethlehem stable. We know the story; for most it became indelibly etched into our memory cells while still a child in a Sunday School class, perched atop one of those miniature chairs, singing a discordant version of “Silent Night” to the accompaniment of an aged upright piano. Or we heard of it first as an adult, gleaned from the ubiquitous carols of the season, or formal-dress television specials of Perry Como, Andy Williams, or The Osmonds. From the reverent, but often inaccurate, recreations lovingly crafted in the church, to the metallic and plastic abominations in store windows we are reminded of this curious, ancient birth that is celebrated annually when the air turns colder and (for some of us) snow begins to fall.

What do you see lying there in the manger, in the dim light and fetid atmosphere of the stable? It is a most unexpected environment for this one with such hallowed ancestry. In human terms, both of His parents carried royal blood; in heavenly terms, He was the offspring of the unique Holy Spirit. Along with the local inhabitants at the time, we would expect the very Son of God to be announced in all His splendor as a majestic, all-conquering monarch—high and

untouchable, resplendent in royal finery. We could not imagine He would come as a helpless, newborn child, but if so, surely in fine and royal trappings, laid upon the finest golden fabrics, attended by the requisite courtiers and high officials.

Instead, the Son of God is laid in a bovine feeding trough, crudely carved from stone, warmed only by dirty homespun. Instead of the perfumery of royal courts, his tiny nostrils first smell the fetid stink of the stable—dung and earth, mud-splattered walls, and the rich musk of livestock.

So what do you see there, lying in this earthy hovel? Do you see the impotence and unformed inabilities of a baby, and wonder what all the fuss is about? Do you see a charming fairy tale and little more?

Do you see, perhaps, the ponderous bulk of the Church, the high and the low, the vast and torturous hierarchy of Christendom? Do you see layer after layer of man-created obstacles keeping the commoner a safe, but insulating distance from God? Do you see the darker elements that have become, by rank traditionalism, barriers to simple intimacy with the Savior?

Do you see the face of child-like innocence, of little boys and girls perched awkwardly on risers, struggling through their memorized Christmas ditties? Do you see the candlelighted fantasies of church vespers, glowing visions beheld through tears of appreciative joy?

Do you see, instead, injustice that sneers at a child meant to bring “peace and goodwill”? Do you see the inequities of pain and poverty, and consider that maybe Bethlehem was just a cruel lie—a cynical joke played out by a disenchanting God?

What do you Seek?

HE CAME AS HE WAS. No effort was made to satisfy the prejudice of myriad factions. He came as He was, with no mind to bend Himself to the convenience or ambition of those who either longed for Him or dreaded His coming. He was part of the “Us,” part of the “Our” in the first chapter of the first book, Genesis. He was—He is—ancient, older than time itself. He did not proceed out of God, but is an equal member of the timeless Godhead. He was there in the beginning, and, in fact, it was He who crafted creation.

All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made.

John 1:3 NKJV

The Son of God showed Himself early on, long before the Bethlehem incarnation. The oldest books in the Bible are peppered with His visitations, and the whole of Scripture is saturated with His life, His principles, His spirit. He is the eternal God, with passions and responsibilities both unique and common to the Father and the Spirit. But only once, at a precise moment of time in a specific village in Judea, did the Son of God come down in touchable, substantial, human form.

...and you shall call His name Jesus...

So God left the throne room of heaven and, distilled into the tiny flesh of a newborn, entered the world He had made. And very few people expected Him to be what He was.

The people of that time and place had anticipated their promised Messiah for centuries. In that time they had developed both public and private ideas of what He would be and what He would accomplish. They had had centuries in which to form their thoughts and expectations. Then, in a brief thirty-three year period, they had to decide: Is this the one? They had to examine His life, His words, His actions, and decide for themselves whether or not this man was truly the long-expected Christ.

We, today, have a different consideration. The ancients were considering the veracity of the Christ in their midst from the perspective of prophecy that predated Him. Did the person standing before them fit the description put down in their literature and traditions? In contrast, we today must consider a historical Christ two thousand years after the fact. The ancients asked, “Is this who the Savior is to be?” But we ask, “*What do you expect from Jesus?*”

He says again, “I am the begotten of the One God, before Abraham was, I am,” and remember what the words “I am” were in Hebrew. They were the name of God, which must not be spoken by any human being, the name which it was death to utter... If you had gone to Buddha and asked him, “Are you the son of Bramah?” He would have said, “My son, you are still in the vale of illusion.” If you had gone to Socrates and asked, “Are you Zeus?” He would have laughed at you. If you had gone to Mohammed and asked, “Are you Allah?” He would first have rent his clothes and then cut off your head. If you had asked Confucius, “Are you heaven?” I think he would have probably replied, “Remarks which are not in accordance with nature are in bad taste.” The idea of a great moral teacher saying what Christ said is out of the question. In my opinion, the only person who can say that sort of thing is either God or a complete lunatic suffering from that form of delusion which undermines the whole mind of man... He was never regarded as a mere moral teacher. He did not produce that effect on any of the people who actually met him. He produced mainly three effects: hatred—terror—adoration. There was no trace of people expressing mild approval.

C. S. Lewis

What do you want in a Savior?

ALL OF WHAT HE IS ARRIVED, some 2,025 years ago, in the person of Jesus—a normal, probably typical baby. The genius of the plan was that it was apolitical. A newborn cannot belong to a political party; he cannot join a rebellion or betray his countrymen. He is helpless, dependent on the goodwill of others. As a Jewish boy, it would be thirteen years before he would even attain his majority.

So the Son of God entered this world as something no one could hate—no one, that is, except the first person who dreaded His coming:

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him.” When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.

Matthew 2:1-3

In Herod’s world there was room for only one king—and he was it. Prophecy described a Messiah who would take charge, and Herod had no wish to share power. Having been double-crossed by the magi, Herod took steps to ensure that any new pretender (in his eyes) would be quickly expunged before he could be crowned.

Then when Herod saw that he had been tricked by the magi, he became very enraged, and sent and slew all the male children who were in Bethlehem and all its vicinity, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had determined from the magi.

Matthew 2:16

Though he was a Jew, and familiar with the prophecies, Herod could not abide the coming of any Messiah that might challenge his position of authority in Judea, and influence with

Rome. What did Herod want in a savior? Probably nothing at all. After more than thirty years in power, he assumed that he was perfectly capable of saving himself.

And that is the typical response of modern man. What do you want in a savior? *A savior? Why, nothing at all. I can take care of myself, thank you. Jesus is for wimps, for losers. I don’t need a savior.*

Christmas is a time filled with warm glows and good feelings and generosity—a time in which even amid the extravagant swirl of tinsel and lights there is room for the babe nestled in straw, surrounded by adoring parents and shepherds and contented cows. People from all walks are drawn to the pleasant imagery surrounding the Christ child. They flock to the Christmas pageants, passing through doorways alien to them the rest of the year. He makes them feel good; it’s a charming, pleasant story. No one can hate an innocent, newborn baby, right?

But it is only a small step from apathy to scorn, a small step from scorn to anger, and only one more from anger to hate. Herod hated the Christ child because He was perceived to be a threat to the king’s power. Modern man, too, hates the Christ because He is perceived to be a threat to the person’s independence—the dominion he thinks he enjoys over his own life. Herod possessed sufficient real power to at least attempt the eradication of this threat. Modern man substitutes words of scorn, ridicule—a rejection, not of things spiritual, but of any Spiritual aspect of Christ.

Two millennia ago the Son of God came down to man in the form of a helpless child. He came not as a threat, but as the solution. He came not as a tyrant, but as a friend. Herod needed Jesus as much as any man or woman today. But instead of embracing the hope, Herod sought only to kill the child—and thus to kill the *idea* that His salvation was even necessary.

How badly do you want a Savior?

AFTER ALL THE PREPARATION and planning of the Godhead, with the cosmic importance of the salvation of all mankind hanging in the balance, when the Son of God came down to dwell for a while among man, He came not to a palace, not to the Jerusalem temple, not even to a middle class neighborhood, but to a stable. Instead of a golden bassinet encrusted with precious stones, the newborn Son was placed in a stone feeding trough encrusted with cow slobber. Instead of a nursery with air sweetened by aromatic herbs and incense, the child was set into a darkened stall filled with the earthy musk of beasts, and the reek of their dung and urine. It was a setting comfortable to those who heard first of the birth.

In the same region there were some shepherds staying out in the fields and keeping watch over their flock by night.

Luke 2:8

It was an honorable profession, but one that required more hands-on experience than higher learning. One didn't attend university to study the ins and outs of shepherding. One generally grew into the job, learning, as a child, from a father or older brother. It was an earthy, but respected line of work.

It does not demean the person or the craft to state the obvious: These were simple folk. Like their latter-day cousin in the new world—the cowboy—their conversation around the night fire probably did not include the essentials of managerial finance, or calculus with analytic geometry. After all, these were people who lived with sheep; they spent their days and nights outside in the rough and tumble of the Judean hillsides. Their essentials were not of finance and geometry, but of the well-being of those in their charge, the best areas for pasturing the flock, and sharing techniques for warding off the carnivores that constantly sought to thin their ranks. And though they may have been fa-

miliar with the prophecies of their faith, these ancient writings would surely not have been the topic of their typical after-dinner conversations.

But when God is ready to present something new and wonderful, it is invariably His custom to do it through simple folk with open minds—and hearts.

And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were terribly frightened. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

Luke 2:9-12

Just imagine if the angel had said the same thing to someone sophisticated and well-schooled—say, someone like a high priest. What would have been his response? *A savior? Born? A savior lying in a feeding trough in a coarse stable? I think not. Now go away; I'm busy being righteous.*

Instead, God came to people of simple stock, people more accustomed to rolling with the punches of life—people with open hearts and minds. And instead of protesting, or doubting the announcement, the shepherds did what they did best: they followed their hearts.

When the angels had gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds began saying to one another, "Let us go straight to Bethlehem then, and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has made known to us." So they came in a hurry and found their way to Mary and Joseph, and the baby as He lay in the manger.

Luke 2:15-16

Too many people today—both within and without the church—tend to over-think the idea of a Savior. As if He were a politician campaigning for office, we debate the pros and cons, His methods and philosophies; we argue doctrine and theology, exegesis and eschatology—all the while missing the simple wonder of God come down to man. We all need a Savior, and *what* He is, is secondary to *that* He is.

What did the shepherds want in a Savior? They probably hadn't given it much thought—but they were at least open to the idea. Oh, to once again experience the simple yet powerful sense of wonder that passed through their

hearts that night: not to ask why or how or complain that none of this makes sense, but to stand quietly in reverent awe and accept the fact that God has provided the Lamb.

When they had seen this, they made known the statement which had been told them about this Child. And all who heard it wondered at the things which were told them by the shepherds... The shepherds went back, glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen, just as had been told them.

Luke 2:17-18, 20

This is the month, and this the happy morn,
Wherein the Son of heaven's eternal King,
Of wedded maid, and virgin mother born,
Our great redemption from above did bring.

That glorious form, that light insufferable,
And that far-beaming blaze of majesty,
He laid aside, and here with us to be,
Forsook the courts of everlasting day,
And chose with us a darksome house of mortal clay.

Oh! Run; prevent them with thy humble ode,
And lay it lowly at His blessed feet,
Have thou the honor first thy Lord to greet
And join thy voices with the angel quire,
From out His secret altar touched with hallowed fire!

John Milton



How does your Savior come?

IN THE VAST AND MYSTERIOUS ECONOMY of God's salvation there are those who are used by Him, specifically and pointedly, to discharge their duties in relative ignorance, never understanding the full scope of the glorious pageant in which they play a part.

In eternity past the Godhead determined that when the Son would descend to live among man, He would have two parents: a mother and a father. They determined that the mother would be a young maiden named Mary, and that the father would be the Holy Spirit. This would be, at least to man, a peculiar union, but one that would ensure the purity of the Christ.

Nonetheless, while Jesus would not require a human father to be conceived, Mary would require a husband. Someone was needed to give her respectability, protection—and to give Jesus a name. By the very nature of his role, this man would need to be strong, yet humble: he would have to be strong enough to withstand the gossip and social pressures that would bring shame upon his family, yet be sufficiently humble to accept the responsibility in the first place. He would need to be a decision maker, the man of the house, yet patient and kind: he would have to lead the family from place to place, following edicts and protecting Mary's child from those issuing them, yet he would have to wait to enjoy the normal privileges of a husband.

Enter Joseph.

Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: when His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was

found to be with child by the Holy Spirit. And Joseph her husband, being a righteous man and not wanting to disgrace her, planned to send her away secretly.

Matthew 1:18-19

There is no reason to set the man Joseph in a nativity set of our own imagining, his character gazing down upon the babe with an insipid, wan smile. There is no reason to restrict the Joseph of flesh and blood to a plaster figurine, devoid of feelings and emotions. He was a man, and he would have entertained many of the same emotions any contemporary man would upon learning that his betrothed—in that day, as legal as a wife—was pregnant, knowing that he was not responsible. Then, compounding



the moral infraction, the story told to him is that she is pregnant by the Holy Spirit! What would *any* man think? Because he was a good, as well as righteous man, he made the decision

to divorce Mary secretly, so as to salvage at least a bit of her reputation. But divorce her nonetheless.

But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins."

Matthew 1:20-21

How did Joseph expect the Messiah to come? Without a doubt, just about by any means other than how He did. How could Joseph ever have imagined that the Savior of his people would come by a union of his virgin wife and the Holy Spirit! And what a remarkable man not to pack his things immediately and leave. Here was a man who was righteous indeed.



People today have their own ideas of how their salvation will come. It may come through a bottle, or a needle, or a handful of pills. It may come through a radio or television talk show that preaches a feel-good cult of empowerment. For some it may come from a support group—or from within themselves—while others may find their salvation in religion.

The world is filled with saviors of every stripe and color. These pretenders offer themselves to an emaciated world starved for redemption. For every person seeking a savior

there is one waiting in the wings, ready to present him or her self in the most pleasant, agreeable way. Their hands are outstretched, welcoming; their pockets are filled with sweets. Everything about them seems to make sense: we expect them to be just as they eventually appear, and they offer just the answers we expect to hear.

For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths.

2 Timothy 4:3-4

But there is only one, true Savior, and He came in a way no one expected. He came with answers to questions that hadn't yet been asked, solutions to mysteries not yet perceived. He became for many a stumbling block to salvation; His life and His end were an offense. Yet He makes no apologies for who He is. Jesus stands with *His* arms outstretched, saying, "This is how I came, and this is who I am. Will you believe?"

"And you know the way where I am going."

Thomas said to Him, "Lord, we do not know where You are going, how do we know the way?" Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me."

John 14:4-6

To the human mind there is something almost illogical in the assertion that God became a man. It is like speaking about a square circle. Yet this is what Christmas says—and we take refuge from our bewilderment not in explanation, but in adoration.

Ralph P. Martin

Are you even Looking?

SPIRIT IS WHAT GOD IS. Because the Godhead predates everything else, it has no lineage, no family tree from which it emerged. But God has something very close to a lineage—He has a type: God is a spirit.

“God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.”

John 4:24

Because He is a spirit, it only makes sense that when God selected someone with whom to connect us permanently to Him, He would choose a spirit: the Holy Spirit. When we take Christ as Lord—thereby entering God’s family and realm—He gives us a gift. God says, *So that you will know that you now belong to Me, so that you will have access to My mind, so that others will know you are Mine—I give you My Holy Spirit.*

Prior to the death and resurrection of Christ, however, the Spirit was not a permanent resident in any person, but came into individuals only for a time, for a specific purpose, or as the mark of their righteousness. Just such a man was Simeon.

And there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; and this man was righteous and devout, looking for the consolation of Israel; and the Holy Spirit was upon him.

Luke 2:25

Simeon was not only a righteous and Spirit-filled man, but he was set apart from others by something else.

And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ.

Luke 2:26

The child had already been given the name Jesus, and had been circumcised on the eighth

day, according to Jewish law. Joseph and Mary were now in the temple to make the required sacrifices—for the purification of Mary and the presentation and redemption of Jesus as a first son. Then, somewhere out in the vast courtyard surrounding the temple, a stranger approached.

And [Simeon] came in the Spirit into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to carry out for Him the custom of the Law, then he took Him into his arms, and blessed God, and said,
 “Now Lord, You are releasing
 Your bond-servant to depart in peace,
 According to Your word;
 For my eyes have seen Your salvation,
 Which You have prepared
 in the presence of all peoples,
 A Light of revelation to the Gentiles,
 And the glory of Your people Israel.”

Luke 2:27-32

This is a remarkable moment! And Simeon was a remarkable man. Unlike Herod, Simeon was not afraid of the Christ; unlike the shepherds, he was not surprised by His coming; and unlike Joseph, he was not caught off-guard by the manner in which the Messiah came. Because his very life and being were infused by the power of the Holy Spirit, Simeon was only overwhelmed with joy at first sight of the baby in Mary’s arms. He knew immediately that this was the One for whom he had been waiting—the One he had been promised.



The real Jesus

THE ORIGINAL “CHRISTMAS” NATIVITY—that gamy home for Jewish livestock—was a holy place. Imagine, it was the first time that pure, undiluted deity had ever come to this grossly fallen earth *as one of us*. God and the preincarnate Christ had been here before; the Holy Spirit had been in and out, out and about for centuries, whenever needed. But never before had any of them come in this form: flesh. *Real* flesh; flesh that required food and sleep, occasional bathing; flesh that grew weary from time to time.

That night in a Bethlehem stable, the real Jesus had no halo—nor did his parents. There was no other-worldly glow about any of them. The cows (if there were any) did not stop chewing their cud to gaze lovingly upon their new tenant. Mary, a teenage girl who had just given birth for the first time—in an animal’s stall—was surely not the fresh-scrubbed, immaculately attired figure in most modern renditions of the scene.

The *real* Jesus (as opposed to those man goes out of his way to conjure out of his own self-serving imaginings) was every bit as human as His mother and her husband, yet He was also every bit as holy and pure as the Father who sent Him. The real Jesus may be many things, but He is never anything less than those two, seemingly contradictory aspects of His being: God and flesh—not *fallen* flesh, as we, but flesh in every other way. As such, He is that most intimate expression of God’s love: God willing to become something less than what He is.

The child we celebrate every year—the real one—rises above the many layers of man’s invention and odd response. Christ came as both a blessing and an offense. He came into the world as the bringer of life, of unclouded joy, of escape from inevitable death. But He also came to prick the conscience, to be someone and represent something uncomfortable—even galling to some.

The only cruelty that accompanied His birth

was the cruelty that would one day be inflicted upon Him; the only inequity was that the spotless Lamb of God would be slaughtered for the sins of others.

Christ can be a dreadful prospect to those lusting after power only for themselves. Like Herod, they will strike out against anything they perceive to be a threat to their own sovereignty. They refuse to consider that there is someone more important, someone with a higher purpose than their own.

Others, like the shepherds, are not actively seeking a Savior, but when He shows Himself, they run happily to Him with minds and hearts open to receive His salvation. Many of those so initially enamored, however, though convinced that Jesus is the Christ, never reach beyond the simple truth of His redemption, and remain stuck forever at an elementary aspect of His grace.

Some people seek the Lord with sober purpose. They are good people, religious—even righteous. But, like Joseph, in their piety they are nonetheless thrown off-balance by the methods and personality of Christ. They may believe, but their faith is slowed by their persistent struggle with who and what He truly is.

Some believers, however, fall deeply in love with Jesus at first sight. Like Simeon, they recognize Him immediately, and embrace all of what He is with their whole heart. More than that, because their lives are infused and energized by the Holy Spirit, their relationship with Him grows ever deeper and more profound with each passing day. They know Him more intimately than they do anyone else.

To gaze upon the child in the manger is to look upon the one dependable hope in a hard and unforgiving world. To look upon Jesus is to see the piercing, forgiving light of God bringing salvation to a people in desperate need of His love.

What do *you* see?