

## Sermon on the Nativity of Jesus Christ

John Calvin

And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. (And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.) And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, 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. And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn. And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men. — Luke 2:1-14

We know that it is our good, our joy and rest to be united with the Son of God. As He is our Head, we are His body, so also from Him we hold our life and our salvation and all good. In fact, we see how miserable our condition would be unless we had our refuge in Him, to be maintained under His keeping. However, we could not reach so high (seeing that scarcely can we crawl upon the earth), unless from His side He approached us, and already He had approached in His birth, when He clothed Himself in our flesh and He made Himself our brother. We could not now have our refuge in our Lord Jesus Christ's being seated at the right hand of God His Father in heavenly glory, unless He were abased as far as being made mortal man and having a condition common with us. That is also why, when He is called "Mediator between God and men," this title "man" is especially attributed to Him. As also for the same reason He is called "Emanuel," that is, "God with us."

Yet when we seek our Lord Jesus Christ to find in Him alleviation of all our miseries and a sure and infallible protection we must begin at His birth. Not only

is it recited to us that He was made man like us, but that He so emptied Himself that scarcely was He reputed to be of the rank of men. He was, as it were, banished from every house and fellowship. There was nothing except a stable and a manger to receive Him.

Since it is so, then, we know here how God displayed the infinite treasures of His goodness when He willed that His Son might be thus humbled for our sakes. Let us recognize also how our Lord Jesus Christ from His birth so suffered for us that when we seek Him we need not make long circuits to find Him nor to be truly united to Him. For this cause He willed to be subject to every shame, in such a way that He was, as it were, rejected by the rest of men. But let us also learn to be little to be received by Him. For it is reasonable at least that there be conformity between the Head and the members. Men need not empty themselves to be of no value. For by nature already they will find such poverty in themselves that they will have good reason to be thoroughly dejected. But let us know of what sort we are, that we may offer ourselves to our Lord Jesus Christ in true humility and that He may recognize us and acknowledge us as His own.

However, we also have to note that, in the history which St. Luke here recites, on the one hand we learn how the Son of God emptied Himself of everything for our salvation, nevertheless, on the other hand He did not fail to leave certain and infallible testimony that He was the Redeemer of the world promised from all time. Even though He took our condition, He was able to maintain His heavenly majesty. Both sides are here shown to us. For our Lord Jesus Christ is here in a manger and He is, as it were, rejected by the world. He is in extreme poverty without any honor, without any reputation, as it were, subject to servitude. Yet He is magnified by Angels from Paradise, who do Him homage.

In the first place, an angel bears the message of His birth. Then the same one is accompanied by a great multitude, even by an army, who are all present and appear as witnesses sent by God to show that our Lord Jesus Christ, being thus abased for the salvation of men, never ceases to be King of all the world and to have everything under His dominion.

Then the place, Bethlehem, gives proof that it was He who had been promised from all time. For the prophet Micah had spoken thus: "And thou Bethlehem, though thou be in great contempt, as a village which is not much to look at, and which is not densely populated, yet from thee shall come forth to Me He Who is to govern My people, and His goings forth will be from all eternity." We see, then, here on the one hand how our Lord Jesus Christ did not spare Himself, so that we might have easy access to Him and that we might not doubt that we are received even as His body, since He willed to be not only a mortal man clothed in our nature, but, as it were, a poor earthworm stripped of all good. May we never doubt, then, however miserable we may be, that He will keep us as His members.

On the other hand, we see Him here marked, as it were, by the hand of God, so that He may be received without any difficulty, as Him from Whom we must expect salvation, and by Whom we are received into the Kingdom of God, from which we were previously banished. For we see that He has in Himself a Divine majesty, since the Angels recognize Him as their superior and their sovereign King. We ought not to doubt, when we shall be under His keeping, that He has all that is needed to maintain us. Let us know, however much He was abased, it in no wise takes away from His Divine power nor hinders us from being securely under His guidance.

Now we see the summary of this history. That is, in the first place, we know that the Son of God, even our Mediator, has united Himself to us in such a way that we must never doubt that we are sharers both of His life and of all His riches. Let us know also that He brought with Himself to us everything that was required for our salvation. For (as I have already said) He was not thus emptied without always retaining His Divine majesty. Although before men He was made of no reputation, yet He always remained not only heir of this world (since He is the Head of the Church), but also always true God.

Besides, let us learn from those who are here ordained as teachers and leaders how we must come to our Lord Jesus Christ. To be sure, the wise men of this world are so inflated with pride and presumption that scarcely will they condescend to be scholars of unlearned men and poor shepherds from the fields. But it is all our wisdom, nevertheless, that we learn from these shepherds (of whom it is here spoken) to come to our Lord Jesus Christ. For although we may have all the sciences of the world stuffed into our heads, of what use will it be when life fails us? How will it help us to know "Him in whom the treasures of all wisdom are hidden," as St. Paul says? Now we see where we must begin. It does us no harm to follow those who have shown us the way to come to our Lord Jesus Christ.

God gave this honor neither to the great ones of this world, nor to the wise, nor to the rich, nor to the nobles, but He chose shepherds? Since it is so, let us follow that order. It is true that Wise Men came from the East to pay homage to our Lord Jesus Christ. But the shepherds had to come first, in order that all presumption might be abolished, and that he who would be reputed Christian must be as a fool in this world. So, let us not bring a foolish presumption to judge by our imaginations the admirable secrets of God, but let us adore them in all simplicity.

Further, let us look at the faith which was in these shepherds. Then it will no longer be difficult to follow them. They come to adore the Redeemer of the world. And in what condition do they find Him? There He is laid in a manger and wrapped in a few little cloths, and it is the sign which had been given to them by the Angel. Now it surely seemed that this was to astonish them and even to

make them turn their backs in such a manner that they might no longer recognize Jesus Christ as their Savior.

For the Scribes and Teachers of the Jews surely thought that the Redeemer who had been promised must come in great pomp, and that He must subject all the world, in such a way that He would have only prosperity, that they would get wealth in abundance to glut themselves, and they would amass all the riches of the world. Here, then, was a scandal which could make these poor people lose courage, so that they would never have come to our Lord Jesus Christ, but rather that they would have been entirely alienated from Him, when it is said to them that they will find Him in a stable and wrapped with rags. The sign given to them of the Redeemer is that He will be laid in a manger as if He were cut off from the rank of men. Yet even that does not turn them away. They come, then, to know Him as Lord, confessing how God has had pity on them and that finally He willed to fulfill His promise which He had given from all time, and they are assured by such a spectacle.

Since, then, the faith of these shepherds was so great that it fought against everything that could turn them from coming to our Lord Jesus Christ, we shall be doubly guilty and stripped of every excuse, unless we learn in their school, and unless the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ (although He appeared without dignity or pomp or nobility of this world) be not a scandal to hinder us, or to make us turn away from the good way, and unless we come to yield to Him as to our sovereign King, and to Him to Whom all dominion is given both in heaven and on earth. In fact, we need such an admonition. For, as I have already mentioned, the doctrine of the Gospel brings only scandal to those who are preoccupied with pride and folly and who repute themselves wise men.

We see also how many fanatics reject everything which is contrary to their brains. There are, on the other hand, many mockers who have never been touched by any feeling of their sins. Because they are profane people who think they will never be brought to an accounting and they do not know whether there is a better life than the one they see here below, they reckon that it is only foolishness so to follow the Son of God and to acquaint oneself with Him. Let us see, then, how much more ought we to be strengthened by this admonition: namely, that the Son of God loses nothing of His majesty and of His glory, and that it is not decreased in His humiliation for our salvation; but rather we ought to be enraptured by it, knowing His inestimable goodness and the love He has borne toward us.

This, then, is how we must practice this doctrine, that we do not fail to come to our Lord Jesus Christ, although at first sight we do not find in Him what our flesh, that is, our natural senses, desire. But although He was wrapped in rags at His birth, and although He had been laid there in the manger, may we know and be resolved that He did not, however, cease to be Mediator to draw us to God His Father, to give us an entrance into the Kingdom of heaven from which we were

entirely shut out. Still more today, although He does not rule in pomp, and although His Church is despised, and although there is a simplicity in His Word which the great men of this world reject, as for us, may we never cease on that account to cling to Him and to subject ourselves to His dominion in a true obedience of faith. For example, when one preaches, according to our custom it is not anything to draw us much. We hear a man speaking. And who is he? He is not of great dignity and reputation. Then, in summary, there is only the word. On the other hand, in what is preached by the Gospel there are many things which seem to us to be against all reason, when we wish to judge them according to our taste. So let us know we cannot draw near to what God shows and declares to us, unless we have first bowed down.

As a confirmation which He adds for our sakes to His Word we have the Sacraments. And would a drop of water suffice to assure us of the remission of our sin, and that God adopted us as His children, and, though we are feeble and frail, yet we shall be clothed with His heavenly glory which will never fail us? Could we find a guarantee and assurance of things so great and so excellent in a little water? In the Holy Supper would a piece of bread and a drop of wine suffice to assure us that God accepts us as His children, that we live in Jesus Christ, and that He has shared everything with us? For it seems that such ceremonies which have no great pomp can have no value. So then, we see still better how what is here mentioned about the Shepherds pertains to us and how we should profit by it today. That is, let us not cease to draw near to our Lord Jesus Christ and to be assured that it is He in Whom we shall find all good, all rejoicing, and all glory, although it seems that He is still, as it were, in the stable and in the manger, wrapped with swaddling clothes. That is to say, there might be many things which could debauch us and dazzle the eyes of a few that they might not perceive the heavenly glory which was given to Him by God His Father, I say, even in the human nature He took from us. For since He is God, He has everything from Himself (as it is said in John 17), but with respect to His humanity He received as a free gift everything that He brought to us, that we might draw from His fullness, and that we might find in Him everything that is desirable, and that we might have all our rest and contentment in Him alone.

Besides, let us note well that the Holy Spirit also wished to assure us that in following the shepherds who are here ordained as teachers and guides, we should have no fear of making a mistake. For if the shepherds had had no other sign than the stable and the manger, we could say, "Look at the poor idiots who make themselves believe foolishly and without reason that He was the Redeemer of the world." That would be altogether too easy for us. We could, then, be in doubt. But the Shepherds were confirmed by other means to be certain that He was the Son of God, He Who was thus laid in the manger. That is, when the Angel appeared to them, then they heard this song which St. Luke adds, where all the Kingdom of heaven renders testimony to our Lord Jesus Christ, that He has all power over creatures, in heaven as well as on earth.

Let us learn, then, to receive (to be assured in the faith of Jesus Christ) everything here proposed to us. For it is certain that God willed to convict of ingratitude all those who today do not condescend to do homage to His Only Son, when He sent such a multitude of Angels to declare that He was the Redeemer Who had been promised. It is vain, then, for us to be satisfied in our unbelief, as we see many stupid people who do not take account of everything that is contained in the Gospel. There are even mockers of God, who are so careless that it makes no difference what is preached to them. They pay no more attention than they would to fables.

There is also something to convict of an obstinate and devilish rebellion all those who do not subject themselves to our Lord Jesus Christ to do Him homage. For since there are unbelievers, they will have an infinite multitude of Angels from Paradise who will testify against them. For these are the ministers of the truth of God. So then, though all the wicked and all those who are steeped in their vices and corruption's, take pleasure in it and are hardened as much as they wish in their unbelief, they have more-than-sufficient witnesses to testify their condemnation. For the Angels of Paradise appeared so that there might no longer be any excuse for us not to receive Jesus Christ as our sovereign King, humbly bowing ourselves before His majesty.

However, let us note on the other hand that God procured our salvation when He sent such a multitude of Angels, so that we might be able to come to our Lord Jesus Christ with a ready courage and that we might no longer be held back by dispute or scruple, but that we might be fully resolved that we shall find in Him all that is lacking in us and that He will have something to supply all our wants and miseries. Briefly, it is He by Whom God willed to communicate Himself to us. Do we wish to seek our life except in God?

There is all fullness of the Godhead in Jesus Christ. When, then, we have such a testimony, it is just as if God extended His two arms to make us feel His inestimable goodness: and to show that only when we have faith in Jesus Christ (I say a faith without hypocrisy) leaning only upon Him, knowing that it is from Him that we must receive everything, then we shall be sharers of all the benefits which are lacking in us and for which we starve. Besides, although today we do not see the Angels who appeared only for an instant, yet this testimony is registered so as to be authentic. For the Holy Spirit spoke by the mouth of St. Luke. Let us be satisfied, then, to have such a witness from God, Who declares to us that the Angels rendered testimony of the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ, so that, knowing how He was made man, that is, that He emptied Himself for our sakes, we may be so delighted as to aspire to the Kingdom of heaven, so as to adhere to Him in true union of faith.

Next we consider the place of His birth, Bethlehem. This is no slight or unimportant confirmation when we see how the Son of God was born as such, a long time before the Prophet had made mention of it. If Joseph and Mary had

had their dwelling-place in Bethlehem and had made their residence there, it might not have been strange that she delivered there and Jesus Christ was born there. But this which ought today to help us has been much obscured. For one might at least know that not without cause the Prophet had said, "Thou, Bethlehem, although thou art today despised as a little village, yet thou wilt produce Him Who is to be Head of My people." But when Joseph and Mary are living in Nazareth and they come into the city of Bethlehem just when she must be delivered and Jesus Christ is born there, who will not see that God guided the whole thing by His hand? Men, then, must knowingly and with sure knowledge be blind when they are not willing to recognize here the Word of God, Who marked His only Son, so He could be received without any doubt as Him Who had been promised.

Surely there was sufficient occasion to cause Joseph to come to Bethlehem in the edict published by the Roman Emperor. But to bring there a woman with child and about to be delivered, it is certain that was not governed by man and God was at work there. We see how even God uses strange means to accomplish His will. For the edict of Caesar, though it was carried out without tyrannical subjection, made it necessary that the Jewish people were then tagged, they had a check upon each person, and it was to show them that they need no longer expect any liberty. Jesus Christ was promised to deliver the Jews and all believers from the subjection of Satan and from all tyranny. It seemed that this edict was to close the door, that God might never accomplish what He had promised to His people. However, it is the means of accomplishing it. For when Joseph and Mary come as poor people subject to a tyrant, a pagan and an unbeliever, and so Jesus Christ is born in Bethlehem, it shows the Prophecy to be true. God (as I have said) here gives full certainty to His own so that they must not doubt the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ. That, then, is how we must apply to our use and instruction the things here discussed. For it is not the intention of St. Luke, or rather of the Holy Spirit Who, spoke by his mouth, simply to write us a history of what had happened. But He expressed here on the one hand how the Son of God did not spare Himself for our sakes, and then on the other hand how He bore infallible testimony that He was the Redeemer in order that He might be received as such.

Let us bethink ourselves to profit from this history, so that we may be able to be in tune with the song of the Angels in glorifying God, and to so receive what He here gives us for the rejoicing of our souls. In the first place the Angel says (that is the one who bears the message of the shepherds), "Fear not. I announce to you a great joy." Then there is this testimony in common from all the army that God sends, "Peace on earth to men." This, then, is what we have to remember first of all: that we seek our joy in Jesus Christ. For, in fact, even though we had all kinds of delights and luxuries, it would only be a matter of drowning ourselves in our pleasures. Yet even if we are too sleepy, even entirely stupid, our conscience will never have rest. We shall be tormented without end and without ceasing. This worm (of which the Scripture speaks) will eat us away, we shall be

condemned by our sins, and we shall feel that with perfect right God is opposed to us and is our enemy. So, there will be a curse upon all the enjoyments of the world, since they will be changed into gnashing of teeth, until men are right with God.

Cursed then are all enjoyments, all honors, all things desirable, until we feel that God received us in mercy. Being thus reconciled with Him we can enjoy ourselves, not merely with an earthly joy, but especially with that joy which is promised to us in the Holy Spirit, in order that we may seek it in Him. For peace and joy are inseparable things. For how, seeing we are surrounded by so many miseries, can we enjoy ourselves? Then, seeing we are cursed in Adam, we are children of wrath, God being our Judge is armed with vengeance to cast us into the pit, what joy can we conceive of, being in such a state? Certainly when we think of it, not only must we be overcome with unrest but in a horrible gehenna which surmounts all the anguishes of this world, unless the devil has bewitched us. As we see many who do not cease to make merry, although they make war on God. But if we have a single particle of feeling in us, it is certain that we shall always be in torment until God is declared favorable toward us.

This peace, then, must precede, that we know that God owns us as His children, even since He does not impute to us our sins. Are we thus at peace with God? Then we really have something over which to rejoice, even with God, following what I have already mentioned. For unbelievers have indeed some peace (that is to say they are so thick that they are not concerned about the judgment of God; they even defy it), but it is not with God. For they never have peace nor rest, except when they forget both God and themselves and they are altogether insensible. But St. Paul exhorts us to have peace with God, that is, to look to Him, and seek as we are able to be peaceable. That is, that when we draw near to Him we be certain and assured of His love. How will that be? By the remission of our sins, by the free unmerited love which He bears toward us in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Let us note well, then, that the peace which the Angels of Paradise preach here carried with it this joy, which the first Angel had mentioned, saying, "I announce to you a great joy," that is, the salvation you will have in Jesus Christ. He is called our Peace, and this title declares that we would be entirely alienated from God unless He received us by means of His only Son. Consequently we also have something to boast of when God accepts us as His children, when He gives us liberty to claim Him openly as our Father, to come freely to Him, and to have our refuge in Him.

However, let us deduce from this that God has so ordained that the Gospel be preached by the mouth of men. Yet the Angels have preached it beforehand. Today it is true that the Church must be taught by means of mortal creatures. Though that may be, we bear nothing new. We only recite the preaching which was done by the Angels of Paradise, and not in a small number, but an infinite

multitude and a great army. Besides, it cannot be that we are as inflamed to magnify our God as when we shall be made fully certain of His goodness. That is why these two things are joined: that the Angels exhort all the world to glorify God, since He has given such a peace on earth. We rejoice, then, over the good that God has freed us by means of our Lord Jesus Christ His only Son. He has taken possession of this peace, in order that praises ascend on high and that they pierce the clouds, and that all the world may re-echo this song, that is, that God may be blessed and magnified everywhere.

We have to deduce from this that we shall always be dumb and that we shall never be able to praise God until He has made us to experience His goodness. For example, how shall poor sinners, while they have troubles and remorse in themselves, who do not know whether God loves them or hates them, be able to bless His Name? But on the contrary the anguish, as it were, will keep them restrained so that they will not be able in any wise to open their mouths. It must be, then in the first place that God knowingly testified to us the love He bears toward us in such a way that we may be resolved that He will always be Father to us. Then surely we shall have something for which to bless His Name.

But as we cannot praise God until He has declared to us His goodness, let us also learn not to have a faith dead or idle, but may we be incited to bless the Name of God, when we see that He has so displayed the great treasures of His lovingkindness toward us. May our mouth, on the one hand, perform its function, and then may all our life correspond to it. For this is the true song, that each one dedicates himself to the service of God, knowing that, since He has bought us at such a price, it is reasonable enough that all our thoughts and our works be applied to this use, that His Name be blessed.

When we shall know that we really are His own, may we know that it is inasmuch as it has pleased Him to accept us to Himself, and that everything proceeds from His free unmerited bounty. So not without cause is added the word that peace is given to men — not for any merit, not that they had acquired it, but by the good pleasure of God. For the word which St. Luke uses means that we must not seek any other reason why our Lord Jesus Christ appeared to us than that God has had pity and compassion on our miseries. As also it is said in John 3:16 that God so loved the world that He spared not His own Son, but delivered Him to death for our sakes.

Let us learn, then, to come to our Lord Jesus Christ in this way: that is, that the message which is here published by the Angels be to us as a burning lamp to show us the way, that faith lead us, and that we know that it is now God in us, as much as it is God with us. Our God with us is declared when He willed to dwell in our human nature as in His temple. But now it is God in us, that is, we feel Him joined to us in greater power than when He showed and declared Himself mortal man. He is even both God and man in us. For first by the power of His Holy Spirit He makes us alive. Then He is man in us, since He makes us sharers of the

sacrifice which He offered for our salvation, and declares to us that not without cause He pronounced that His flesh was truly meat and His blood was truly drink.

This is also why the holy table is made ready for us, so that we may know that our Lord Jesus, having descended here below and having emptied Himself of everything, was not, however, separated from us when He ascended into His glory in heaven. But rather it is on this condition that we are sharers of His body and His blood. And why so? For we know that His righteousness and His obedience is the satisfaction for our sins and that He appeased the wrath of God by the sacrifice of His body and of His blood which He offered in this humanity which He took from us.

Since this is so, may we not doubt when Jesus Christ invites us to this table, although we perceive only bread and wine, that He really dwells in us, and that we are so joined to Him there is nothing of Himself that He is not willing to communicate to us. May we recognize, I say, that in order that we know how to profit from this Sacrament which has been established for us from Him. However and whenever we receive it, may we know assuredly that God might have delivered us from the depth of condemnation in which we were by another means if He had so willed. But He willed to give us more assurance of the love which He bears toward us when we have Jesus Christ for a Guarantee, so that we seek all our good in Him. May we know that we cannot fully appreciate what this is, until He be given, as it were, in the midst of us and He be so approached by us that by means of Him we are led into the Kingdom of heaven, from which we were banished and deprived because of our sins.

That is how our Lord Jesus Christ must be applied to our salvation, if we wish to approach God, if we desire to have a real spiritual joy, contentment, and rest, also if we desire to be armed against the temptations which the devil can stir up. But to be sharers of this holy table, let us examine ourselves, and let us in the first place recognize our miseries, that we be displeased by them and entirely confounded by them. Besides, let us know that God willed to sweeten all our sadness and anguish when He so shed Himself abroad in His only Son, and that He willed that we should enjoy Him fully.

Although we are subject to much poverty in this world and besieged by enemies who are like ravenous wolves, though the devil on the one hand ceases not to seek to prey upon us and unbelievers bark like mastiff dogs, although, I say, we are agitated by many troubles and menaced from all sides, although we must endure many annoyances, let us hold it as a certainty that we shall never cease to have peace toward our God. Let us pray to Him that He will make us experience it by His Holy Spirit, since that is one thing that surpasses all human understanding (as already we have noticed from St. Paul) and let us so learn to be content with our Lord Jesus Christ and the spiritual benefits of which He makes us sharers, that we may be able to bear patiently all the miseries and afflictions of this world.

May it not prove to be evil to us to be molested from all sides, in brief, to be exposed to all shame and disgrace, provided that Jesus Christ is with us, and He blesses all our miseries and afflictions, and we gain such fruit from it that we realize in the midst of all our poverty's we ask nothing except to glorify our God. And when worldlings gain their triumphs to their confounding, since they cannot enjoy themselves without fighting against God, may our true joy be to serve Him in all fear and humility, and to give ourselves entirely to His obedience. That is how we have to profit from this doctrine.

Now we shall bow in humble reverence before the majesty of our God.

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