

GOD WITH US

The Promise of Christmas



Alice Mathews



introduction

God with Us

The Promise of Christmas

Some stories are hard to believe. They may seem too good to be true, or too bad to be accepted. Or we may think we already know what happened and refuse to accept another explanation. Sometimes what we hear just doesn't ring true.

But what do we do with a story that, though told with echoes of a world beyond ours, resonates

with life as we know it *and* as we long for it to be?

God with Us reflects the drama and wonder of such a story. In the pages that follow, our friend Dr. Alice Mathews invites us to see more clearly our own choices—waiting to be made.

Our Daily Bread Ministries

contents

one

A Curse and a Promise 5

two

The Promise Fulfilled 9

three

A Profound Faith 15

four

A Dangerous Situation 21

five

A Harrowing Journey 27

MANAGING EDITOR: J.R. Hudberg

COVER IMAGE: Terry Bidgood

COVER DESIGN: Stan Myers

INTERIOR DESIGN: Steve Gier

Interior Images: (p.1) Terry Bidgood; (p.5) Steve Ford via Stock.xchng;
(p.9) Bruno Sersocima via Stock.xchng; (p.15) Philippe de Champaigne via
Public Domain; (p.21) Antoine, Louis, & Mathieu Le Nain via Public Domain;
(p.27) John Rogers Herbert via Public Domain

Excerpted from *A Woman God Can Use* by Alice Mathews. Copyright © 2012 by
Alice Mathews. Used by permission of Discovery House.

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from Holy Bible,
New International Version®, NIV® Copyright ©1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica,
Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

© 2015 Our Daily Bread Ministries, Grand Rapids, MI

All rights reserved.

Printed in USA



one

A Curse and a Promise

Imagine waking up one day in a perfect world. You stretch in bed without feeling the ache in your back. You reach for your eyeglasses on the nightstand but realize, with your hand in midair, that you can see perfectly. Dumbfounded, you turn to wake your spouse. As he yawns and rubs his eyes, you know suddenly that you love him more deeply than you ever have before.

The morning news has never been so refreshingly dull. No overseas conflicts, no acts of terrorism, no political scandals. When your phone rings, you expect an update from your friend about her chemotherapy sessions. Instead your prodigal son asks how you are and whether it would be okay if he came home.

You've been under a curse, and now you're free.

It's a nice idea, but we all know a perfect world doesn't exist. But what if the idea resonates so deeply because it was once true and will be again?

Adam and Eve were flawless people in a flawless world who had flawless relationships with their Creator God and each other. When we look at them, we see what we were created to be, what God had in mind for each of us.

But in this couple we also see what humanity chose to become. God asked one thing of Adam and Eve. In the midst of a lush garden created just for them, he asked them not to eat fruit from one tree. Their choice must not have seemed like much at the moment—just a bite from a piece of fruit. But the choice had serious consequences. Their choice resulted in a curse.

First, Eve and Adam were separated from God. All of

us since then have been distanced from God. The most important of all relationships, the one with our Creator, was broken.

Second, Adam and Eve were separated relationally from each other. The struggles we have today in trying to relate perfectly to the people we love show us how devastating this part of the curse is. Our relationships are seldom all we want them to be.

Third, the couple was separated from nature's proper functioning. We battle weeds in our gardens and pain in our bodies. Our toil¹ is endless, and we struggle to accommodate ourselves to a world that is not always kind to us. Eventually our bodies fail us entirely.

*↗ The word translated **toil** in most English versions of Scripture is the Hebrew word **itsabon**.¹ The root word **asab**² connotes sorrow, and alludes to the act of grueling labor with difficult results. By contrast, we see a distinctly different connotation in Genesis 2:15, where the Scripture says, "The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it." Adam and Eve's disobedience changed everything.*

All of this came about because one beautiful morning, Adam and Eve did the one thing God asked them not to

do. Can you imagine their anguish? They knew life in a perfect world as no one since has known it. They knew exactly what they had lost with the curse.

But God did not leave them without hope. God buried a promise¹ in the curse. At some future time, a Redeemer would rise up and crush evil, even though the embodiment of evil, Satan, would first strike the Redeemer's heel.

↗ "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel" (GENESIS 3:15).

Thousands and thousands of years passed after the promise was given. Women and men struggled with alienation from God, from each other, and from the physical world around them. It must have seemed that God would never fulfill his promise. Had he forgotten? Had he changed his mind? Who would break the curse?

¹ Thomas, R. L. (1998). *New American Standard Hebrew-Aramaic and Greek dictionaries*: Updated edition. Anaheim: Foundation Publications, Inc.

² Allen, R. B. (1999). 1666 **רָצַח**. In R. L. Harris, G. L. Archer, Jr. & B. K. Waltke (Eds.), *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (R. L. Harris, G. L. Archer, Jr. & B. K. Waltke, Ed.) (electronic ed.) (687). Chicago: Moody Press.



two

The Promise Fulfilled

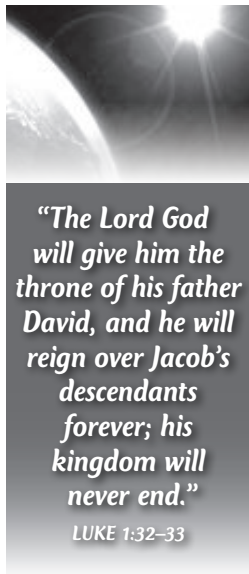
Then, in the tiny fifth-rate hill village of Nazareth, in the third-rate land of the Jews, the curtain went up on a scene that changed the course of history and the lives of millions of men and women. It is the familiar story we find in Luke 1:26–38:

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent

the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"



"The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

LUKE 1:32-33

The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail."

"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.

Imagine Mary's shock and wonder. For thousands of years the Jews had talked about God's promised Redeemer. They had the words of the prophets and knew that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, south of Jerusalem. They knew he would be born to a woman who was a virgin. They knew he would be born to a descendant of the great King David. *Someday* he would come. But now? And through a simple peasant girl who lived several days' journey north of Bethlehem in a Galilean town called Nazareth?

Mary knew the promises, as all Jews knew them. She might even have nurtured the secret hope, as many

women must have nurtured it, that God would choose *her* to bear the Redeemer. But when the angel appeared to her that day, her shock must have been enormous. Can you imagine what she felt?

When the angel Gabriel¹ appeared to Mary, she was clearly troubled. She needed the word of comfort that followed: "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God" (LUKE 1:30). After this came the announcement that she would become the mother of God's promised Redeemer, who was to be called Jesus, the hope of the ages.

↪ **Gabriel** is one of only two angelic servants of God named in Scripture. The other is Michael the archangel. There is much in traditional folklore about Gabriel, but little in Scripture. He is mentioned only in Daniel and Luke.

Note Mary's first reaction in verse 34: "How will this be since I am a virgin?" She did not contradict Gabriel's message by saying, "Impossible!" She merely wondered how it was possible.

The answer came: God, by the Holy Spirit, would father the child. "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one

to be born will be called the Son of God" (LUKE 1:35). Proof that God could do the impossible lay in the fact that Mary's cousin Elizabeth had become pregnant in her old age.



"'I am the Lord's servant,' Mary answered. 'May it be to me as you have said.'"

Before Mary lay a choice. She could say, "No, sorry Gabriel. Joseph would never understand such an arrangement. The people in this small town would gossip. That would create too many problems for the child as well as for us. I don't think I really want the troubles this would create."

Mary could have said all that. But she didn't. We hear her acceptance of God's plan in verse 38: "'I am the Lord's servant,' Mary answered. 'May it be to me as you have said.'" End of conversation. Gabriel left.



three

A Profound Faith

f you had been Mary that day, what would you have thought after Gabriel left you? Possibly you would have sat still for a while, stunned at the awesome experience of an angelic encounter and even more stunned at the message that *you* had been chosen by God to bring the Redeemer into the world.

We aren't told how long Mary took to digest the

experience and the reality of this extraordinary pregnancy, but it appears that it wasn't too long before she "got ready and hurried" to visit her cousin Elizabeth, who lived in the hill country of Judea, south of Nazareth. It was at least a few days' journey by foot.

Whether Mary thought of visiting Elizabeth because the angel had mentioned the older woman's pregnancy or because the two women were already good friends is not clear. Apparently it was important to Mary to spend some time with Elizabeth. In any case, Mary arrived at Elizabeth's house, and even as she passed through the door, Elizabeth was filled with the Spirit of God and exclaimed:

"Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!" (LUKE 1:42–45).

"Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!" Adam and Eve had heard the

word of the Lord but had *doubted*. Mary heard the word of the Lord from his messenger Gabriel and *believed*. She believed against everything that seemed rational, natural, or humanly possible. She could submit to God's plan because she believed.

Mary responded to Elizabeth's inspired greeting with a hymn of praise to God, which is recorded in Luke 1:46–55:

"My soul glorifies the Lord
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has been mindful
of the humble state of his servant.
From now on all generations will call me blessed,
for the Mighty One has done great things for me—
holy is his name.
His mercy extends to those who fear him,
from generation to generation.



***Adam and Eve
had heard the
word of the Lord
but had doubted.
Mary heard the
word of the Lord
from his messenger
Gabriel and
believed.***

He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
he has scattered those who are proud in their
inmost thoughts.

He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.

He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty.

He has helped his servant Israel,
remembering to be merciful
to Abraham and his descendants forever,
just as he promised our ancestors."

Much in Mary's hymn takes us back to Hannah's song¹ in 1 Samuel 2. Mary must have known not only the stories but the songs of her Jewish history and heritage. Hannah's words came easily to her lips as she praised God, expressing her newfound hope.

¹ Much like Mary's Magnificat, **Hannah's song** is a heartfelt prayer of praise. For years, Hannah had been unable to give birth. Her prayer in 1 Samuel 2 is a poetic outpouring of praise in gratitude for her son Samuel, whom she dedicated to the Lord.

Mingled in Mary's praise is a clear understanding that

the world in which she lived—and the world in which we live today—is not the world God designed for us. It is a cursed world shot through with sin and death, the result of Adam and Eve's choice. Mary's world was one of oppression by Romans and a cruel and capricious king, Herod. It was a world in which even the religious leaders in Israel "devour widows' houses, and for a pretense make long prayers." (MATTHEW 23:14 NKJV).

Mary's praise to God includes her awareness of the poor, the hungry, and the afflicted. Mary saw the miracle of her conception of Jesus[♠] as *God on the move*. God was about to begin the long-awaited tasks of scattering the proud, of bringing down rulers, of lifting up the humble, of filling the hungry with good things, and sending the rich away empty. In short, Mary saw that God was moving to fulfill his promise, a promise first made thousands of years before.



Mingled in Mary's praise is a clear understanding that the world in which she lived—and the world in which we live today—is not the world God designed for us.

A promise made to the two whose choice had begun the curse that twisted people's minds, calloused their hearts, and made the world an ugly, despotic, and painful place in which to live.

↯ *The precise role of the Holy Spirit is not defined in the historical accounts of the conception of Jesus. Scripture tells us only that Gabriel told Mary, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you." This much is clear to us. When Mary gave birth to Jesus, she was still sexually pure, making the conception and birth a truly **miraculous event**.*



four

A Dangerous Situation

It is probable that Mary stayed with Elizabeth for 3 months until the birth of John the Baptist. Then, 3 months pregnant herself, Mary returned to Nazareth. For those 3 months she had lived with the wonder, excitement, and thrill of being the God-bearer. Now she had to face the scorn and rejection of Joseph and the hometown people.

Again, imagine Mary's predicament. She was clearly in an embarrassing situation. Joseph too was in a tough spot. A Jewish engagement often lasted a year and was a kind of marriage without sex. If Mary got pregnant during this period, tongues would wag. If Joseph, knowing that he was not the father, decided to break the engagement to Mary, she could be stoned to death. On the other hand, if Joseph went ahead with the wedding to Mary, people would think he had violated the strict customs of chastity during the engagement period. ▀



A Jewish engagement often lasted a year and was a kind of marriage without sex.

▀ *At the time of the birth of Christ, Jewish engagements were typically about one year in length. This allowed sufficient time for the groom to discern if the bride-to-be had remained sexually pure. To be sexually impure prior to marriage was to be guilty of a capital crime under the Old Testament law (DEUTERONOMY 22:20–24).*

Follow the struggle Joseph had within himself as

soon as he learned that Mary was pregnant. The story is recorded in Matthew 1:18–25:

This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us").

When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the

Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.



[Joseph and Mary] had to live with the reproach of a society with the highest standards of sexual purity in the world at that time.

Now, imagine Joseph's dilemma. We don't know from the Bible whether Mary tried to explain her pregnancy to him. Had you been Joseph, would *you* have believed her story about an angel and a divine conception? Or would you more likely have thought that Mary had been untrue to her vows? Joseph too needed an angelic visitor to convince him of the truth concerning his present circumstances.

Joseph was in a wretched situation. He needed supernatural proof to believe in the supernatural birth of Jesus. He too needed to believe the word of God through an angel and then act on that word. Joseph by faith became willing to pass himself off as the father of

Mary's baby, even though the townspeople would believe he had taken advantage of her during their engagement. It was the only way to protect her.

During Jesus' later ministry we hear the Pharisees asking with a sneer, "Where is your father?" (JOHN 8:19). Did they question whether Joseph was really Jesus' father? In the same chapter, they tell Jesus, "*We* are not illegitimate children" (v. 41 EMPHASIS ADDED), implying that Jesus was. Clearly both Mary and Joseph were compromised. No amount of explanation could clear their names and reputations. They had to live with the reproach of a society with the highest standards of sexual purity in the world at that time.

➤ **Joseph** displayed tremendous character and faith. Allegations of sexual impropriety were taken very seriously among the people of Israel, and were rightly considered a serious breach of God's law. Joseph knew that he and Mary were completely innocent of such charges, but had to bear them without any substantive way of refuting them.



five

A Harrowing Journey

But another trial still lay ahead for Mary and Joseph. For that we go to Luke 2:1–3:

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register.

Mary, now nearly ready to deliver, had to go with Joseph to Bethlehem, the city of David, their ancestor, to register for the census. The trip was nearly 90 miles. It had to be made either on a donkey or on foot. Either way it was a long and arduous journey. We can easily imagine how exhausted Mary must have been, possibly already in early labor, when they arrived in Bethlehem. Turned away because the inn was packed with others who had also come to register for the census, they climbed down the steep hillside on which the inn had been built and found shelter in the cave under the inn, where animals were stabled. There, Mary gave birth to Jesus, the Holy One of God, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a cattle food trough.

An insignificant couple arrived as strangers at the end of a long and tiring journey. A simple peasant girl faced the delivery of her first child virtually unattended, with no material comfort, no conveniences. All this could have passed completely unnoticed. But it didn't. God had other plans.

Once again an angel of the Lord brought terror when he came calling. A band of shepherds in a nearby field

learned of the birth of this seemingly insignificant baby to virtually unknown parents in a dirty stable in an out-of-the-way town on the eastern rim of the Mediterranean Sea. Suddenly all that seemed insignificant was revealed to hold life-changing, world-changing significance as God stamped that event with his great plan.

"Today," the shepherds were told, "in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord" (LUKE 2:11). A Savior. The Christ. The Lord. Immanuel, God with us. Jesus, the One who would save his people from their sins. The Redeemer promised to Adam and Eve in Genesis 3:15. The One whose coming would restore for each of us the possibility of a personal relationship with God our Creator. The One who broke the curse of death and will one day free us from the curse of alienation once and for all.



Suddenly all that seemed insignificant was revealed to hold life-changing, world-changing significance as God stamped that event with His great plan.

You can hear his voice in the Scriptures. "Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me" (JOHN 14:1 NKJV). 🌿



Almighty God, as the children of our first parents, Adam and Eve, we too have sinned against you.

Every time we hear Mary's story, we find ourselves overwhelmed by how much we need your mercy.

We do believe in you, but not nearly as deeply as you deserve. We do believe in your Son, but not as though we deserve anything that he did for us.

Thank you for asking your lowly servant Mary to bear for us the Redeemer who would eventually live and die and rise from the dead in our place.

Please grant us the forgiveness and life that your Son offered when he said, "Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life" (JOHN 5:24 NKJV).



Our mission is to make the life-changing wisdom of the Bible understandable and accessible to all.

Discovery Series presents the truth of Jesus Christ to the world in balanced, engaging, and accessible resources that show the relevance of Scripture for all areas of life. All Discovery Series booklets are available at no cost and can be used in personal study, small groups, or ministry outreach.

To partner with us in sharing God's Word, click this link to donate. Thank you for your support of Discovery Series resources and Our Daily Bread Ministries.

Many people, making even the smallest of donations, enable Our Daily Bread Ministries to reach others with the life-changing wisdom of the Bible. We are not funded or endowed by any group or denomination.

[CLICK TO DONATE](#)