

THE
Jesus
STORY

EVERYTHING THAT HAPPENS *in the*
NEW TESTAMENT IN PLAIN ENGLISH

DR. WILLIAM H. MARTY



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To my daughter, Talitha,
who is no longer a “little girl,”
and her husband, Jeff.

And to my son, Stephen,
who is the father of my two incredible grandsons,
and his wife, Monica.

The Bible is right. “Children are a blessing!”

Books by Dr. William H. Marty

The Jesus Story

The Whole Bible Story

The World of Jesus

Acknowledgments

In a sense this book is not my own. The idea came from Andy McGuire at Bethany House. He also guided me in writing and organizing the content and started the process of transforming my academic content and style into a popular and contemporary story of the Bible. I would also like to give credit to Christopher Soderstrom, who used his editorial skills to put the manuscript into its final form. Having read the proofs, I have a new appreciation for editors. Without their revisions, this book would read like my lecture notes at Moody Bible Institute. Both men were positive and helpful encouragers when I am certain they could have been critical.

I owe a great debt, not so much for this book, but for my life as a follower of Christ and my career as a teacher to two of my former teachers. It was never my goal to go into ministry. After college, I was commissioned as an officer in the U.S. Army. After four years and a tour of duty in Vietnam, I resigned my commission and made a life-changing decision. I enrolled in Denver Theological Seminary. Because there wasn't an official diagnosis of post-traumatic stress syndrome, I didn't know why I was at risk emotionally. Two men, both of whom are now with the Lord, modeled for me what it meant to be a follower of Christ. Dr. Bruce Shelley, professor of Church History, and Dr. Vernon Grounds, president and professor of Pastoral Ministry, not only taught what to believe but showed me how to live as an authentic Christian. Without their example

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and personal counsel, I would have never graduated from seminary and gone on to a career as a pastor and eventually a Bible teacher.

I am also grateful for my wife, who encouraged me in the challenging work of writing, and proposed using the book of Revelation as the Epilogue for the book. My wife is a wonderful gift from the Lord.

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Introduction

Several years ago I ran in a ten-mile road race in Waxahachie, Texas. The race was called the Cabrito Stampede (*cabrito* means small goat), and it was part of a local community celebration. In addition to food (roasted goat) and drinks, there were all kinds of activities for adults and kids. It was a Texas kind of thing, complete with a “cow pie” throwing contest. A “cow pie” is a Texas Frisbee.

About five hundred runners started the race in town, headed out on a small rural road around a lake, and then returned for the finish and, of course, a post-race meal of cabrito, roasted goat. A mile into the race I looked up and saw an old Model A coming straight at us in the middle of the road. When the Model A got closer I saw the driver. He was an old farmer wearing a pair of overalls and a straw hat and gripping the steering wheel of that old car with both hands. He had this determined look on his face, and I thought, *This should be interesting. Who is going to move?* In all of my running experiences I’d never played chicken with a car. As the old farmer in his Model A got closer, I realized he didn’t intend to get off the road or even swerve to make room for us. We moved—half to one side of the road and half to the other side. The farmer drove through the middle of the pack with a look of satisfaction on his face. He had divided us.

Like that old farmer, when Jesus Christ came into the world he divided humanity by his radical claims. When Jesus was in Jerusalem for the Feast of Tabernacles he shouted out to the crowd, “If anyone is thirsty, he should come to Me and drink! The one who believes in

Me, as the Scripture has said, will have streams of living water flow from deep within him” (John 7:37–38 HCSB). John explained that Jesus was talking about the Holy Spirit that he would give to believers (v. 39). Some in the crowd concluded that Jesus was the Messiah; others were not convinced. John says they were divided (v. 43). The religious leaders even ordered the temple guard to arrest Jesus, but they couldn’t because they were amazed by his teaching (vv. 45–46).

C. S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity* explains why it is impossible to remain neutral about Jesus Christ.

I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: “I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept His claim to be God.” That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God; or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.

The story of Jesus is recorded in the four gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Though all four gospels tell the same story, there are significant differences.

Matthew was a Jewish tax collector writing to his Jewish countrymen about a Jew. Showing how Jesus fulfilled Old Testament prophecies, Matthew hoped to convince his countrymen that Jesus was Israel’s long-awaited king. Jesus’ messages and miracles provide convincing evidence that he is the king of the Jews. But Jesus is more.

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He is not only a descendant of David; he is a descendant of Abraham, through whom God promised to bless all nations. Thus, though Jesus is Israel's king, he is also the Son of God who has come to save the world. The gospel ends with Jesus' disciples worshiping him after the resurrection. Jesus has now received all authority and power, not through military conquest, but through suffering and death. He commissioned his followers to make disciples of all nations.

From Mark's perspective, Jesus is the Servant of the Lord. Mark captures Jesus' mission with a single verse: "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). Rather than Jesus' words, Mark focuses on Jesus' works. Jesus is remarkable. His miracles are evidence of his power over disease, death, and demons. But Jesus is also a mystery. He is so human that after ministering all day he is exhausted and falls asleep in a boat. He would have slept through a furious storm, but his terrified disciples woke him screaming that they were going to drown. After Jesus had calmed the storm with a single command, his bewildered disciples asked, "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!" (4:41). The Roman centurion who watched Jesus die on the cross answered the question, "Surely this man was the Son of God!" (15:39). The centurion was right. Jesus was both man and God.

Luke, who was a physician and the only Gentile gospel writer, focused on Jesus' compassion for the poor and the despised. William Barclay in *The Daily Study Bible* series suggests why Luke emphasizes Jesus' compassion for outcasts. "It has been said that a minister sees men at their best; a lawyer sees men at their worst; and a doctor sees men as they are. Luke saw men and loved them all."

Writing to a Greek named Theophilus, Luke gives the most complete account of the life of Christ from the angel's announcement of his birth to his resurrection and ascension.

Luke records the religious leaders' repeated criticism of Jesus because of what they considered his scandalous behavior. He talked to and even ate with tax collectors and sinners. Jesus' response was equally scandalous. He said it is not the healthy who need a physician but the sick, and, "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:32). On another occasion, Jesus told three stories about the incredible love of God—the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son (Luke 15).

John, known as the "beloved disciple," boldly claimed that Jesus was the Son of God. John's purpose, however, was more than historical; his aim was to convince people to believe on Jesus as the Son of God and Savior (20:30–31). Through conversations with individuals such as Nicodemus and the unnamed woman at the well, and his conflict with the religious leaders, John gives proof that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God (6:69). John also shows that Jesus was God in the flesh (1:1, 14). On his way to Samaria, Jesus stopped at the well in Sychar because he was tired and thirsty (4:6–7). He wept at the tomb of Lazarus (11:35). And he experienced all the pain of death by crucifixion (19:28–30). Who was Jesus? He was both God and man!

Though the four gospels are about the same unique person, it can be confusing to put together the storyline of the life of Christ. *The Story of Jesus* does that. I hope this book not only helps and encourages you to read the Bible, but also convinces you to join in God's story, which is also your story.

One

BIRTH AND CHILDHOOD OF JESUS

Main Characters

Zechariah and Elizabeth

Gabriel

John the Baptist

Mary and Joseph

Jesus (Messiah)

Wise men (Gentiles from the east)

Herod the Great

Setting

Land of Israel

Galilee (province in the north)

Nazareth (town in Galilee)

Judea (province in the south)

Jerusalem (capital of Israel, in Judea; location of the temple)

Bethlehem (seven miles south of Jerusalem)

Egypt

PREPARING FOR JESUS' BIRTH

The birth of Jesus fulfilled the promises God had made to Abraham and David.

God had promised to bless Abraham, make him the father of a great nation, and bring a blessing to all people through him. As a descendant of Abraham, Jesus Christ came to bring salvation to the entire world.

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Christ was also in the line of David and fulfilled the promise that one of David's descendants would rule forever.

Four hundred years passed from the time of Malachi, the last Old Testament prophet, to the coming of John the Baptist. John came as a prophet to announce the coming of the Messiah, Jesus Christ.

John was born to Zechariah and Elizabeth when Herod was king of Judea. Zechariah was a priest and served in the temple in Jerusalem. He and Elizabeth were older and had been faithful to the Lord all their lives. They did not have any children.

While Zechariah was on duty, he was startled to see an angel from the Lord standing next to the incense altar. Gabriel said, "Don't be afraid, Zechariah. The Lord has answered your prayer. Elizabeth will give birth to a son, and you are to name him John."

Gabriel told Zechariah that John would bring them joy and that he would have the power of the Holy Spirit from birth. John's mission was to prepare Israel for the coming of the Lord by calling on them to return to their God.

Gabriel's message was astounding. Zechariah asked, "How can I be sure of this? I am old, and so is my wife."

Gabriel said the Lord had sent him to announce this good news to Zechariah, and because Zechariah didn't believe it he would not be able to speak until it came true.

Zechariah stayed so long in the temple that the people began to wonder what had happened to him. When he came out he could only make signs; he couldn't speak.

He returned home after his time of service was completed, and, as Gabriel had promised, Elizabeth conceived.

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent Gabriel to Mary, who was a virgin. She lived in Nazareth, a town in Galilee

(northern Israel). “Greetings!” Gabriel said. “You are highly favored, and the Lord is with you.”

Mary was frightened, but Gabriel reassured her. “You have found favor with God and will give birth to a son, whom you are to name Jesus. He will be the Son of the Most High God and given the throne of David. His kingdom will last forever.”

Mary was bewildered. “How can this be, since I am a virgin?”

The angel said the Holy Spirit would cause her to conceive by the power of God, so her son would actually be God’s Son. Elizabeth, six months pregnant, was proof that nothing is impossible with God.

Mary humbled herself before the angelic messenger and answered, “May everything happen as you have promised.” Then Gabriel left her.

Mary decided to visit Elizabeth and Zechariah, who lived in the hill country of Judea (south of Nazareth, where Mary and her husband-to-be, Joseph, lived). When Mary arrived and greeted Elizabeth, Elizabeth felt her son jump in her womb. She was filled with the Spirit and cried out, “You are blessed, and the son you are carrying is blessed.”

Mary responded by praising the Lord for the son he had given her: “My soul praises the Lord, for he has been gracious to a lowly servant girl. The Mighty One has done a wonderful thing for me and for all of Israel. He has remembered the promises he made to Abraham and his descendants.”

Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months before returning home.

When Elizabeth gave birth, all her neighbors and relatives rejoiced because the Lord had been so gracious to her.

On the eighth day, when it was customary to circumcise and name a newborn son, Elizabeth gave him the name John. The

neighbors were surprised; they thought he would be named after Zechariah, and they wanted to know if Zechariah approved.

He was still unable to speak, so he wrote “John” on a clay tablet. As soon as Zechariah wrote it, his speech was restored, and he began to praise God.

The news of these strange and unusual events became the conversation of every household in the Judean hill country. They wondered what John would become, because he was obviously a special child, blessed by the Lord.

Zechariah, filled with the Holy Spirit, sang a prophetic song about his son:

Praise to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to save his people. He has sent a mighty Savior, as he promised David and Abraham. My son will be called a prophet of the Most High God, because he will prepare people for the coming of the Lord. He will tell them how to find salvation and forgiveness of their sins. He will be a light for those in darkness and living in the shadow of death. He will guide us to peace with God. (See Luke 1:68–75.)

As John grew physically, he also grew spiritually. He became a remarkable man of God. When he was old enough, he chose to live alone in the wilderness.

Mary was engaged to Joseph, and when he discovered she was pregnant, he decided to break the engagement; he thought she had been unfaithful to him. He was godly and considerate, so he planned to do it discreetly rather than disgrace Mary publicly.

The angel of the Lord, however, spoke to Joseph in a dream and explained that Mary had conceived by the Spirit’s power—there was no reason he should not marry her. The angel said Mary would give birth to a son, and that they should give him the name

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Jesus (which means “Savior”), because he would save people from their sins.

When Joseph woke, he did exactly as the angel had commanded. He married Mary but did not have sexual relations with her until she had given birth to their son, Jesus.

JESUS’ BIRTH

Jesus was born during the rule of the Roman emperor Caesar Augustus, who issued a decree requiring all Jews to register in the town of their birth. Joseph, from Bethlehem, went there to register and took Mary with him even though she was expecting a child.

In Bethlehem, Mary gave birth. They had to place their newborn baby in a feeding trough for animals because they couldn’t find a room in the inn.

The birth of Jesus would have gone unnoticed had not the angel of the Lord appeared to shepherds. It was during the darkness of night while they were watching sheep that he appeared to them and the glory of the Lord surrounded them.

They were terrified, but the angel said, “Do not be afraid. I have good news. The Savior, who is Christ the Lord, has been born in the City of David (Bethlehem). You will know who he is because he is lying in a feeding trough.”

Suddenly, a large group of angels appeared and praised God, singing, “Glory to God, and peace to men on earth.” They disappeared as suddenly as they had appeared.

The shepherds discussed what had happened and decided to go to Bethlehem. They found Joseph and Mary and the baby exactly as the angel had said. They told everyone what they had seen. Mary, however, kept silent and treasured everything in her heart.

Jesus' parents were devoted Jews. As instructed by the angel, Mary and Joseph named their son Jesus on the eighth day after his birth.

They also fulfilled all the requirements in the law of Moses in raising Jesus. After forty days, they went to Jerusalem to dedicate him to the Lord.

Many in Israel were longing for a messianic Savior. Simeon had lived his entire life assured he would not die until he had seen the Anointed One. On the day of Jesus' dedication, the Spirit led Simeon to the temple; when Mary and Joseph came to dedicate Jesus, Simeon took Jesus in his arms and praised God, saying, "Now I can die in peace, because I have seen the Savior you have sent to save the nations and your people Israel."

Simeon also blessed Mary and Joseph and predicted Mary would experience intense pain because of people's rejection of her son.

A prophetess named Anna was also in the temple at the time of the dedication. Her husband had died after they had been married only seven years. She was now eighty-four and had never left the temple; she had devoted herself to prayer and serving the Lord.

When she heard Simeon speaking to Mary and Joseph, she began praising God and told everyone that God had sent their son to save Israel.

In addition, people from distant lands were looking for the Messiah. In the east, wise men had seen a star and made the journey to Jerusalem to worship the King of the Jews.

JESUS' CHILDHOOD

Not everyone considered the Messiah's birth an amazing work of God. When King Herod heard about the birth of Jesus, he feared Jesus would challenge him as king. He asked the religious teachers

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for information, and they told him a prophet had predicted that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. Herod met with the wise men and asked them to report to him after they had found the child—“so he could worship him also,” he said.

After the wise men met with Herod, the star guided them to Bethlehem and stopped over the house where Mary and Joseph were staying. When they saw Mary’s son, they bowed and gave him gifts of gold and valuable spices.

After worshiping the child, they returned to their own country by a different route because an angel had warned them that Herod intended to kill the child, not worship him.

The angel also warned Joseph in a dream of Herod’s murderous intentions: “Flee to Egypt and stay there until I tell you to return; Herod is plotting to kill your son.” Joseph didn’t even wait for daylight. He left for Egypt during the night.

Herod was furious when he realized the wise men had departed without informing him of the child’s exact location. He went on a rampage and ordered his soldiers to kill all the boys under two years of age in the Bethlehem area.

After the death of Herod, the angel of the Lord told Joseph it was safe for him to return to Israel. Instead of returning to Bethlehem, they went to their hometown of Nazareth, in the northern province of Galilee.

Jesus grew up in the town of Nazareth. God’s favor was on him. He was a healthy young man and filled with wisdom.

Jesus’ parents continued to honor the Lord by meeting all the requirements of the Law. They made the yearly trip to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover (an annual feast for celebrating Israel’s escape from slavery in Egypt). When Jesus was twelve, they took him with them to Jerusalem.

After they started home, though, they couldn't find him. When they rushed back to Jerusalem to look for him, they found Jesus in the temple discussing complicated issues of the Law with the religious teachers. Everyone was greatly impressed with his wisdom and his understanding of the Law.

His parents were perplexed. They didn't know what to think. Mary said, "Son, why have you done this? Your father and I have been frantically searching for you."

Jesus replied, "Why were you searching? Didn't you know I would be in my Father's house?" But they didn't understand.

Jesus returned to Nazareth with his parents and was obedient to them. He continued to develop physically, intellectually, and spiritually. He was highly regarded by both God and people.

Chapter Summary

When Israel was occupied by the Romans, and Herod was king of Judea, God sent Gabriel to a priest named Zechariah, informing him that his wife Elizabeth was going to have a son. John would be filled with the Holy Spirit from birth; his purpose in life would be to prepare Israel for the coming of the Lord by calling on people to return to their God.

Six months later God turned the world of a young Jewish girl upside down when he informed her she had been chosen to give birth to the Son of God. Mary was only engaged to Joseph, so having a son seemed impossible. Gabriel told her anything is possible with God, and she would conceive by the Holy Spirit's power.

When Joseph learned Mary was pregnant, he made plans to break the engagement. The angel of the Lord, however, spoke to him in a dream, assuring him that Mary had not been unfaithful.

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Jesus was born in the small town of Bethlehem in the province of Judea. The long-awaited Savior's birth was announced by the angel of the Lord to shepherds. A large group of angels appeared and praised God. Then the shepherds went to Bethlehem to see the child; they praised God, telling everyone about the birth.

Having received word of this new Messiah, Herod felt his kingship was being challenged. Thus, he ordered all the male infants in Bethlehem executed.

Joseph, Mary, and Jesus sought refuge in Egypt, and after Herod's death they returned to Nazareth, where Jesus spent the rest of his childhood years.