

Once Before Time

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The most commonly told stories of the birth of Jesus center around 1) the book of Matthew, where we read of the Star of Bethlehem and the wise men and 2) the book of Luke, where we read about the manger, the angels and the shepherds in the field.

But the Christmas story told in the Gospel of John is radically different. John doesn't write about the birth of a child and he doesn't write about Mary and Joseph.

Matthew and Luke set the stage for their story of Christmas with the town of Bethlehem and how that tiny little backwater town was the scene of the birth of Jesus, God in the flesh. But the Gospel of John expands the stage setting beyond time and space.

The word picture John paints for the backdrop of the coming of Jesus is the universe and how eternity came into human time. He speaks of the Creator of all matter becoming matter, and being one with his creation. He speaks of eternity and perfection and divinity entering into the human dimensions and limitations of time, space and matter.

John offers some breathtaking panoramas and perspectives about the big, big story of Christmas!

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

He was with God in the beginning.

Through him all things were made: without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind.

The light shines in darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. —John 1:1-5

While many stories begin with the words “once upon a time” John’s Christmas story, about eternity invading human time and space by eternity, begins with the words “in the beginning.” Instead of telling us about “once upon a time” the sense here is “*once before time.*”



John links “once before time” with a time when God came out of eternity into our world of time and space.

He came from outside time into time.

John writes about “in the beginning”—before time existed, before time began, before the creation of the world as we know it, and before God came into the world in the person of Jesus.

John links “*once before time*” with a time when God came out of eternity into our world of time and space. **He came from outside time into time.** John’s Christmas story summarizes that story as a cosmic upheaval.

Imagine John taking his historical video camera and panning back from the details, so that he can give us the big picture—the universal stage setting of the Christmas story. John’s Christmas story tells us the birth of Jesus was a cosmic upheaval, an earthquake-like revolution in the status quo of our world and its religion.

A RELIGIOUS LEADER SEEKS JESUS AT NIGHT

Spiritual light was a fundamental cosmic change brought about by the birth of Jesus. *In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.*—John 1:4-5

Physical light is central to the modern celebration of Christmas, a fundamental ingredient in the way we celebrate and decorate.

Light introduces change—when spiritual light comes into a dark place, humans who enjoy spiritual darkness, and find darkness comfortable and to their liking do not welcome change. Therefore, by and large, humans then and now for that matter, resist the Light of Jesus Christ.

The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him.—John 1:9-10

In the third chapter of John we read the story of Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a religious teacher of the Jews who came to Jesus at night (John 3:1-2). Nicodemus came to Jesus, the Light of the world, in the literal nighttime, in physical darkness,

in large part because he lived in spiritual darkness.

As a religious leader Nicodemus full well knew that his world of religion resisted Jesus, and thus it was only at night Nicodemus felt he might be unseen and undetected by those who knew him and who would frown on him consulting with Jesus.

The first part of the discussion Jesus had with Nicodemus hinged on spiritual rebirth. Jesus explained the difference between being born of the flesh and born of the spirit (John 3:3-8).

Jesus told Nicodemus that he could not be born into the kingdom of God—he could not “see” (light is central to physical and spiritual vision) the kingdom unless he experienced spiritual rebirth and transformation.

Jesus introduced the kingdom

***“The true light that gives light to everyone
was coming into the world.”***

of God to Nicodemus as a spiritual dimension God gives humans, by his grace. The kingdom, which is one and the same as the idea we often speak of as heaven, comes from above.

That is, the kingdom of God does not come from a physical place or source—the kingdom of God comes from a spiritual, eternal source which is outside of the world of time and space in which we live.

If one is spiritually reborn, if one is born of the Spirit—if one is spiritually transformed—then one is “in heaven”—one can then “see” heaven.

When we are in spiritual

darkness we see when the Light illuminates us (John 3:3). “Seeing” the kingdom of God is another way of speaking of being spiritually reborn, of being born of the Spirit.

WHEN THE LIGHT OF HEAVEN CAME INTO OUR DARKNESS

Humanly speaking, we think of “going” to heaven—we think of our goal as “getting to heaven.” We think of ascending to heaven.

But Jesus says that heaven, in his own person, descended and “came down” to us. When Jesus was born the perfection of God’s eternity of grace invaded the imperfections of our fleshly world. Heaven came to be with us, in the person of Jesus. Jesus brought the kingdom of God to us, from above.

The birth of Jesus begins “once

before time” and it means that the eternity of heaven, which transcends time and space, has come into our world.

Think of the way Jesus’ birth is most often depicted. The image that normally comes to mind is a well-cared-for newborn baby laying in a manger, being loved and adored. This is not by any means the real story, and it romanticizes Jesus’ birth into a big fluffy cloud of sentimental mush. In this way, the birth of Jesus becomes a “once upon a time” story instead of a ***once before time and once into time*** story.

Baby Jesus was lying in a

manger in a barnyard because Joseph and Mary found no room in the inn. Darkness then, and now, wants no part of the Light of this world.

We can only speculate as to why no room was found inside for a pregnant woman, because the Bible doesn't provide dogmatic details in this regard. But we can say that such a situation was deplorable—why wasn't a woman about to give birth given accommodation?

Yes, Jesus, the Light of this world, was loved by Joseph and Mary, and yes, the Wise Men brought him gifts. But we have to add some other elements to the reality of what really happened

When Herod heard that a king was going to be born, someone Herod considered to be a pretender to his own throne, Herod ordered the murder of all the boy babies in Bethlehem.

To make sure he killed this pretender to his throne, Herod ordered the murder of all boy babies two years and under not only in Bethlehem, but in the greater vicinity.

This *violent rejection* by religious leaders continued when Jesus grew up and finally started to preach. And of course, religious authorities who did not welcome his Light and rejected the change he represented, finally had Jesus killed.

world resists Jesus—and that same resistance can affect you and me.

Sadly, when some preach Jesus today it's as if they have repackaged him, selling him as if he were a new car or a widescreen television. Some say that Jesus is somewhat like Prozac—they say that Jesus was a self-help teacher, a motivational speaker who wanted people to live their best life now.

The darkness of our world rejected Jesus then—and it still resists him now. We don't naturally yield to the revolutionary Light of Jesus that transforms us, spiritually re-birthing us into the kingdom of God.



*Let us all invite Jesus to en-lighten us
and to continue en-lightening us.*

when Light came into the darkness of our world, and they are not all rosy and sweet and wonderful.

There was obviously a *lack of hospitality*. That's why they were in the barnyard. Jesus, Joseph and Mary are not welcomed with open arms. Beyond that, from the beginning, the darkness responded to the Light of Christ by trying to extinguish him.

But Jesus, the spiritual outcast, cast out of the synagogue, despised and rejected—is not the theme of Christmas cards that celebrate his birth.

Generally speaking, we find *resistance to Jesus* in every part of our dark and corrupt world. We find resistance to Jesus in every part of our society—from government to education to religion. The darkness of our

How might Jesus want you and me to change—right now? Here's the question for you and me: Will we invite Jesus to begin to change or continue changing our lives this Christmas? Let us all invite Jesus to *en-lighten* us and continue *en-lightening* us. □

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