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The story of Jesus and his followers

## THE NEW TESTAMENT

After God's people returned from exile, hundreds of years went by. Then the Romans marched in and took control of the country.

There were Roman soldiers everywhere.

The people had to pay tax to Rome.

They hated it and longed for freedom.

The prophets had promised that one day God would send his own King, the 'Messiah'.

'He will drive out the Romans and set us free,'  
the people thought.

But this was not what the prophets meant.

So when God's King did come,  
most people did not recognize him.

It began like this . . .

## A girl named Mary

In the town of Nazareth in the north of Israel (the district called Galilee) there lived a girl named Mary. She was just an ordinary girl. She helped her mother bake the bread and spin the wool and fetch the water like the other girls. When she was old enough her parents arranged for her to marry Joseph, the town carpenter. But then, one day, something quite extraordinary happened.

Mary was busy with the day's jobs as usual, her mind full of the coming wedding, when she looked up and saw a stranger standing watching her. Before she could say a word, the man spoke:





‘I am Gabriel, one of God’s messenger-angels,’ he said. ‘I have a message for you from God.’

Mary could hardly believe her ears. She felt scared, and she wondered what the angel could mean.

‘Don’t be frightened,’ the angel went on. ‘God knows all about you and he loves you. He has sent me to tell you that he’s chosen you for a very special honour. You are to be the mother of God’s promised King. The baby will be God’s own Son.’

‘But I don’t understand,’ Mary said. ‘I’m not even married yet . . .’ Her head was buzzing with questions.

‘This is something God will do. Nothing is too hard for him. You remember your cousin Elizabeth? Everyone thought she could never have children. But now she is expecting a baby. You see, there is nothing God cannot do.’

When Mary heard this, she knew that she could trust God to do whatever he said. She did not have to understand it all.

‘I will do whatever God wants,’ she said.

## 'His name is John'



As soon as she could, Mary set out to visit her cousin Elizabeth. It was a long journey, but at last she arrived at the house where Elizabeth lived with her husband Zechariah.

'As soon as I heard the news, I had to come,' Mary said. And she began to tell Elizabeth all that had happened. But to her surprise, Elizabeth already knew.

'It's a wonderful thing,' Elizabeth said, 'that God has chosen you to be the mother of the King.'

And she began to tell Mary her own surprising story . . .

Elizabeth and Zechariah had longed for a baby. They had asked God about it in their prayers. But the years passed and no baby came. They began to grow old, and they gave up hope.

Zechariah was a priest, and his turn came to go to the Temple at Jerusalem and take part in the daily service. He was specially chosen to go inside the Temple and burn the sweet-smelling incense on the altar.

While he was there, alone, God's messenger-angel, Gabriel, came to him.

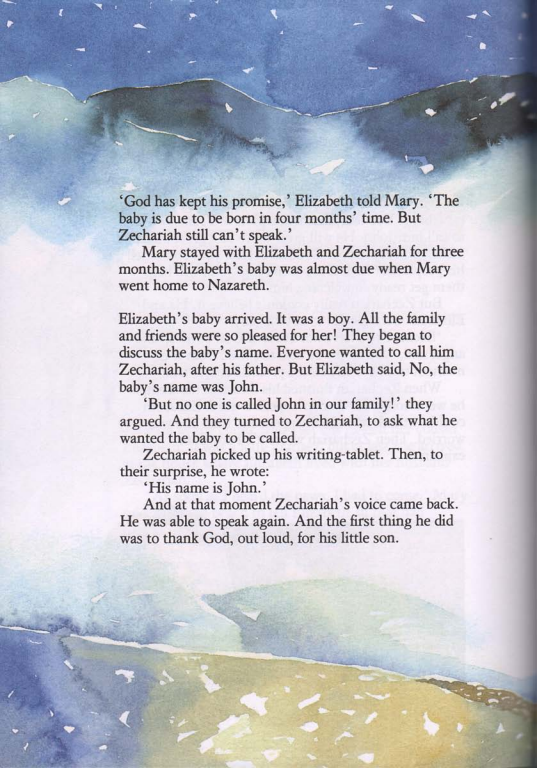
'Don't be afraid, Zechariah,' the angel said. 'God has sent me to tell you that he has heard your prayers for a baby. You and Elizabeth will have a son. You are to call him John. He will grow up to be a great man and make you very happy. God has chosen your son to tell his people that their King is coming. John will help them get ready to welcome him.'

But Zechariah really couldn't believe it. He and Elizabeth were too old to have a baby!

'Because you have not believed God's word,' the angel said, 'you won't be able to speak, from this moment until the day God's promise comes true.'

When Zechariah finished his duties in the Temple he went home. He couldn't speak a word. Elizabeth couldn't think what had happened to him. She was very worried. Then Zechariah wrote it all down, to explain . . .





‘God has kept his promise,’ Elizabeth told Mary. ‘The baby is due to be born in four months’ time. But Zechariah still can’t speak.’

Mary stayed with Elizabeth and Zechariah for three months. Elizabeth’s baby was almost due when Mary went home to Nazareth.

Elizabeth’s baby arrived. It was a boy. All the family and friends were so pleased for her! They began to discuss the baby’s name. Everyone wanted to call him Zechariah, after his father. But Elizabeth said, No, the baby’s name was John.

‘But no one is called John in our family!’ they argued. And they turned to Zechariah, to ask what he wanted the baby to be called.

Zechariah picked up his writing-tablet. Then, to their surprise, he wrote:

‘His name is John.’

And at that moment Zechariah’s voice came back. He was able to speak again. And the first thing he did was to thank God, out loud, for his little son.



# The King born in a stable

Joseph the carpenter was worried. Mary, the girl he loved, was expecting a baby. It wasn't his baby; and they weren't married. The gossip had started already. He would have to break off the engagement.

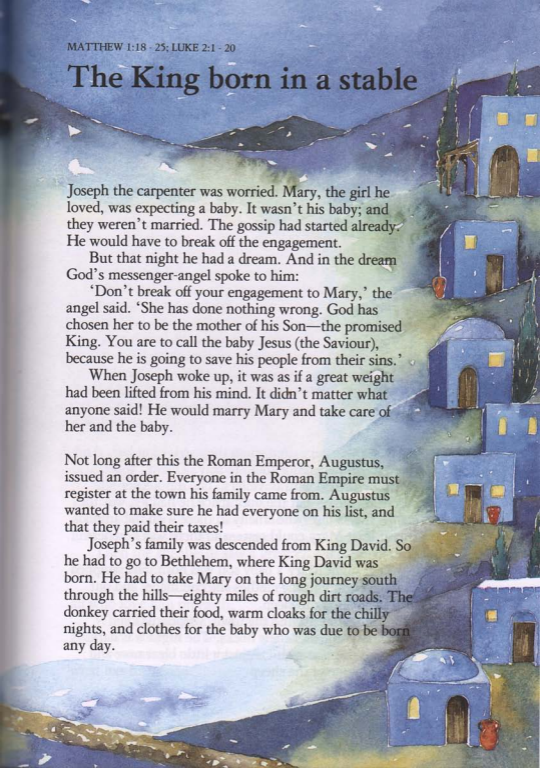
But that night he had a dream. And in the dream God's messenger-angel spoke to him:

'Don't break off your engagement to Mary,' the angel said. 'She has done nothing wrong. God has chosen her to be the mother of his Son—the promised King. You are to call the baby Jesus (the Saviour), because he is going to save his people from their sins.'

When Joseph woke up, it was as if a great weight had been lifted from his mind. It didn't matter what anyone said! He would marry Mary and take care of her and the baby.

Not long after this the Roman Emperor, Augustus, issued an order. Everyone in the Roman Empire must register at the town his family came from. Augustus wanted to make sure he had everyone on his list, and that they paid their taxes!

Joseph's family was descended from King David. So he had to go to Bethlehem, where King David was born. He had to take Mary on the long journey south through the hills—eighty miles of rough dirt roads. The donkey carried their food, warm cloaks for the chilly nights, and clothes for the baby who was due to be born any day.





Mary was very tired when they arrived at last. And there was nowhere for them to stay. The inn was already crowded with travellers. The inn-keeper felt sorry for Mary—but the only space he had left was the stable. It was dirty and smelly in there with the animals. But at least Mary could rest—and there was nowhere else.

That night Mary's baby son was born. She wrapped him up warmly in the clothes she had made, and put him in a manger to sleep.

On the hills around the town, shepherds kept watch, looking after their flocks. The night was dark and everything was quiet—just a little bleat now and then from one of the sheep.



Then suddenly there was a blaze of light—so bright, the men had to shield their eyes. And out of the brightness came the voice of God's messenger-angel.

'Don't be afraid. I've come with good news—for you and all the world. The Saviour has come—God's promised King—born today in Bethlehem. You will find the baby asleep in a manger.'

Then the shepherds saw a great crowd of angels, all singing praises to God.

'Glory to God in heaven,' they sang, 'and peace to all who love him on earth.'

When the angels had gone and the sky was dark again, the shepherds began to talk among themselves.

'We must go to Bethlehem,' they said, 'and see what has happened.'



They made sure the sheep were safe. Then they hurried into the town. There they found Mary and Joseph—and a new-born baby lying in the manger. Then they knew that what the angels had told them was true.

They told Mary and Joseph all that had happened. Then they went back to the sheep, telling everyone they met on the way about the baby and the angel's message. They sang as they walked along, thanking God for all they had seen. It was a night they would never forget.

# Strangers—and a star



When Mary's baby was eight days old, he was given his name—Jesus. Soon it was time for Joseph and Mary to do as the Jewish law said, and dedicate their first son to God. So they took the baby to God's Temple at Jerusalem.

There was a good old man called Simeon living in the city. God had promised him that before he died he would see the King. Simeon was there when Mary and Joseph came to the Temple with Jesus. He took the baby in his arms and thanked God for him.

'God has kept his promise,' Simeon said. 'Now I shall die content. For I have seen the Saviour.'

Anna, too, saw the baby and gave thanks to God. She was an old lady of eighty-four who spent all her time in the Temple, saying prayers to God and thanking him. Anna told everyone in the city that the King they were waiting for had come.

Mary and Joseph were amazed at all that had happened. They went back to Bethlehem. And not long after, there was another surprise.

Strangers from the east—men who studied the stars—arrived in Jerusalem.

'Tell us where we can find the baby who is born to be King of the Jews,' they said. 'We have seen his star and come to pay him homage.'

Soon the whole town was talking about the wise men and their strange question. What could it mean?

The Romans had made a man called Herod king of the Jews. He was most alarmed when he heard the news. Herod did not want a rival king in his land. He



sent for the priests and teachers of God's law.

'When the Saviour comes, where will he be born?' Herod asked.

'In Bethlehem,' they answered. 'That is what God's prophets say.'

Then King Herod had a secret meeting with the strangers, to find out when they first saw the star.

'Go and look for the child in Bethlehem,' he said. 'And when you find him, let me know, so that I can come and pay him homage too.'

So the strangers came to Bethlehem, still following the star. They found the baby in one of the houses, with Mary his mother. Then they opened their bags and brought out presents—strange, rich presents to give to a baby!—gold, sweet-smelling frankincense and a spicy ointment called myrrh.



God warned them in a dream not to go back to King Herod. So they went home by another road.

After they had gone, an angel came to Joseph in a dream.

'Get up, quickly,' he said. 'You must take Mary and the baby to Egypt. Go at once. It is not safe for you here. King Herod will be looking for Jesus. He wants to kill him. Stay in Egypt until I tell you it is safe to leave.'



Joseph lost no time. He woke Mary, and they quickly packed a few clothes, the things they needed for the baby, and Joseph's tools. It was still dark when they set off down the dusty road south through the desert to Egypt, where another Joseph had saved the lives of his family long, long before.

Herod was furious when he realized how the wise men had tricked him. He was a cruel man who had many enemies. And he was always afraid that someone would murder him and seize the throne. He intended to make quite sure this baby king did not grow up. So he sent his soldiers to Bethlehem. They had orders to kill every boy under two years old. King Herod was taking no chances.

No one in Bethlehem could ever forget that terrible day—and the people hated Herod more than ever.

Not very long after this, King Herod died. The angel came to Joseph again, in a dream, and told him it was safe to go home. So Joseph and Mary and Jesus went home to Nazareth.

Mary never forgot Simeon and Anna, the shepherds and the wise men. She often thought about the wonderful things that happened when Jesus was born.

As the years passed, Jesus grew up. He was strong, and quick to learn. God loved him and so did everyone who knew him.





# The boy in the Temple

Every year, in the Spring, Joseph and Mary went to Jerusalem for the annual Passover Festival. (At Passover time each family killed a lamb and ate a special meal, to remind them of how God had rescued his people from slavery in Egypt.) When he was twelve, Jesus went with them, joining the happy groups of visitors who crowded into the city.

The busy, exciting days of the feast were soon over, and it was time to go home. Mary and Joseph set off with the crowd returning to Nazareth.

The boys were always running ahead or lagging behind, so Mary and Joseph did not notice Jesus was missing until the evening. None of their friends had seen him.





Mary and Joseph were much too worried to sleep that night. Next morning they went back to Jerusalem, looking for Jesus. Another whole day passed before at last they found him—in the Temple, listening to the men who taught God's laws, and asking questions. Everyone who heard him was amazed at how much he understood.

'Why did you do this to us?' Mary asked. 'Your father and I have been so worried.'

Jesus seemed almost surprised at her question.

'But surely you knew I had to be here, in my Father's house,' he said.

Mary and Joseph were puzzled by Jesus' answer. They were forgetting that Jesus was no ordinary boy, that God was his Father.

So they returned to Nazareth, where Jesus was as obedient to them as he had always been before.

## The King's herald

Zechariah helped his little son to learn and understand the scriptures—God's laws and the words of the prophets. From the start, John was trained for the work God had chosen him to do.

When he was older, he lived alone in the desert. He wore clothes made of rough camels' hair, with a leather belt round his waist. He lived on locusts and wild honey.

There in the desert God gave John his message. And when he was grown up he began to preach and teach. Crowds flocked to hear this strange, wild-looking man who spoke with such power.



‘God’s King is coming soon,’ he said. ‘Make sure you are ready. Change your ways, and God will forgive you.’

John was very outspoken. He told people what they were doing wrong. Many of those who heard him really wanted to live better lives. So he took them down into the River Jordan, ‘baptizing’ them in the water as a sign that their past sins were washed away. They could make a fresh clean start. When they asked him what they ought to do, John answered:

‘Share your food with those who are hungry. If you have more clothes than you need, share them too.’ He told the tax collectors to stop cheating and the soldiers to be content with their pay.

