

# Birth and Childhood

by Harris Franklin Rall

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*The sermon explores the significance of Jesus' birth and childhood, emphasizing the simplicity and profound impact of his early life on human history.*

**Topics:** "Jesus Birth", "Christian Origins"

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## Description

Harris Franklin Rall preaches about the importance of understanding the beginnings of the Christian religion by studying the life of Jesus, focusing on what he taught, wrought, and his spirit and purpose. The simplicity of Jesus' life, his birth, and the significance of his existence as the turning point of human history are highlighted. The sermon delves into the stories of Jesus' birth as narrated in Matthew and Luke, emphasizing the essential truth and faith depicted in these accounts.

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## Transcript

"John Stuart Mill, the great philosopher of positivism, once said, that humanity could not be too often reminded of the fact that there was once a man by the name of Socrates. He was right; but it is more important to remind humanity again and again that once there stood in her midst a man by the name of Jesus Christ." To understand the beginnings of the Christian religion one must first study Jesus. It is not necessary to construct a biography. The Gospels do not really afford the material for this. We may study his life in broad outline, but the great aim is to get a picture of Jesus himself, what he taught, what he wrought, and what his spirit and purpose in life were. This simple life, that came to so early a close, was the turning point of human history. What was this life to have produced this result?

The story of Jesus' birth is given by only two of the four Gospels, and these two give us quite distinct accounts. Matthew's story is as follows: Joseph is informed by an angel that Mary, to whom he is betrothed, shall bear a child. To the mother and child in Bethlehem (nothing is said of Nazareth) there come certain. Magi with gifts, led there by a star. Warned by an angel, Joseph flees to Egypt, while Herod slays the little children of Bethlehem in the effort to kill the one that "was born King of the Jews." Joseph returns after Herod's death, but fears to go to Judæa on account of Archelaus and so settles at Nazareth in Galilee (Matt 1:18 to 2:23).

Luke's story is longer and introduces a larger circle. Here it is Mary that is told of the wonderful child who is to be the deliverer of his people. From their village in Nazareth, Joseph and Mary go to their ancestral home at Bethlehem near Jerusalem because of a census taken by the Romans. Here she brings forth her child, while simple shepherds, who have seen a light and heard a wonderful song, come to worship from

the nearby fields. In Bethlehem they remain until they have fulfilled the requirements of the law, first circumcising the child, then after thirty-three days presenting the child in the temple and offering for the mother the simple sacrifice that was asked of the poor. This done, they return to Nazareth (Luke 2:1-39).

About these stories there has been a great deal of discussion, and principally for two reasons: first, because of the differences between them; second, because of the story of the virgin birth. As to the former, the differences include not only those in the two stories just told but in the genealogies which both give. It is plain that the writers had formed quite different pictures as to how the birth of Jesus occurred. How far they can be reconciled is not really an important matter. They agree as to the parents of the child, the place of the birth and later home, and the wonderful manner and meaning of that birth.

What is more important is to appreciate the beautiful simplicity of the story, especially as told by Luke. There is no stronger witness to its essential truth. It is not such a story as men would have invented for the coming of a king. The humble parents, the rude stable, the simple shepherds, the quiet return home again--nothing could be simpler, more human than this. The essential faith of the early church is set forth here in truest manner. For that church the life of Jesus was first of all a normal human life, just as is shown here. Secondly, it was a life from God, the life in which God came to men.

As to the story of the virgin birth, it has been pointed out that the rest of the New Testament is silent upon this, and that in Luke there is but a single clause that refers to it. Two points should be made clear here. One is that the virgin birth was evidently not essential for the faith of the early church. Paul and John, who say nothing concerning it, are the two writers who give us the highest conception of the divinity of Jesus. The other is, that to the church it has always seemed the fitting conception of the mode of the coming of the Messiah. It is always to be remembered, however, that it is the character and life of Jesus which lead us to believe in the virgin birth, and not the virgin birth which leads us to believe in Jesus.

The exact date of Jesus' birth is not known, neither month nor day nor year. It was not till the sixth century that men began to date events from the birth of Christ. It was a Roman monk, Dionysius the Little, that proposed it. His reckoning was not accurate, and the date of the birth is probably about 5 B.C. So much is known, that the civilized world today, in every event that its histories record and every document of business or of news, pays tribute to that humble birth as the turning point of history.

Of the home life of Jesus there is little to be said. There is no reference to Joseph after Jesus' boyhood, and tradition says that he died early. That must have meant burdens of labor and responsibility for Jesus as the oldest son. There, were at least seven children (Matt. 13:55, 56), five of them sons. It must have been a very humble home, probably but a single room, and that used for the carpenter work as well. But it must have been a very rich home. When we think of the Jews of Jesus' day, we are apt to call up the New Testament pictures of the formal Pharisees or the worldly Sadducees. The first pages of Luke show us another circle. Here are Elisabeth and Zacharias, Simeon and Anna, Joseph and Mary. The songs of Mary and Zacharias and the words of Elisabeth and Simeon show us the atmosphere in which these people moved, the simple piety and the earnest expectation with which they looked for the day of deliverance of their nation. There must have been many such simple, quiet lives in which the noblest spirit of the Old Testament psalms and prophetic writings lived on. And such was Jesus' home. We are told that Joseph was a just, or kind, man. A devout man he must have been. He gave his sons the old patriarchal names: Jesus (or Joshua), James (or Jacob), Joseph, Simon, and Judas. Jesus' own words seem to give us suggestions of what that home life was. When he prays in the garden he uses the simple word that Mary taught him to call Joseph as a little child, the Aramaic word for father, "Abba." He cannot think of a father

who would give his child a stone for bread. Many of his illustrations must have been taken from the old home: the dough swelling and bubbling with the leaven, the housewife sweeping the dark room for the lost coin, the hungry children crowding around for a bit of bread, the father abed at night with his children about him in the one room of the house and unwilling to get up for the neighbor who comes to borrow a loaf.

We can form some picture also of the training which Jesus received. No other nation had such a system of education as the Jews. It was for all children, not for the few. The theme of instruction was the law. "Ask one of us concerning the laws," says Josephus, the Jewish historian, "and he can recite them all more readily than he could repeat his own name." The mother began the work at home, which was taken up by the father, and probably carried on in the elementary village school connected with the synagogue. The first words that Jesus thus learned at home were probably the noble opening words from the Shema, or confession of faith: "Hear, O Israel: Jehovah our God is one Jehovah: and thou shalt love Jehovah thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might" (Deut 6:4). The various festivals of the Jewish year, marking the great events in Jewish history, were a part of this education, as were also the regular gatherings at the synagogue. Luke tells how Jesus in his early ministry "came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up: and he entered, as his custom was, into the synagogue on the Sabbath day."

At the same time it is important to realize that Jesus was brought up in Galilee, not in Jerusalem or Judæa. There was a wide gulf between the religion of the prophets and psalmists that filled his heart, and the deadly formalism, the slavery of the letter, the narrow bigotry and pride that opposed him when he came to work as a man. There is a humanness in his spirit, a breadth in his outlook, a simplicity and directness in his teaching, that we cannot associate with the streets of Jerusalem or the classrooms of the rabbis.

One incident from the boyhood days tells us how deeply the training took hold upon this youth. At the age of twelve or thirteen years the Jewish boy became a man in matters of religion and assumed the full duties of the faith. One of these was the journey thrice a year to the great feasts at Jerusalem. The story of Jesus' first visit is the only break in the silence that rests upon the years from infancy to the day when he began his ministry. Later legends tell of a precocious child confounding the learned doctors in the temple by superhuman knowledge. Luke's picture is very simple, though deeply suggestive. It is that of a boy already thoughtful about the deep things of life, and so stirred by the city and the temple and the solemn ceremonies of the passover feast that he forgets parents and all as he tarries in the temple. His one passion is already the business of his Father. But it is all normal and wholesome. He goes back as the dutiful son, and his life unfolds as a boy's life should, growing in mind and body, in the esteem of parents and friends, and in fellowship with God (Luke 2:40-52).

One other element in his training must be noted. As the boy grew older, he came to know a larger world than his home and village. We know how deeply the world of nature impressed Jesus. Paul speaks of cities and soldiers and athletic contests; Jesus of birds and flowers, of fields and flocks, of storms and sunsets. The Galilee of his day was a beautiful and most fertile country. And then there was the larger world of men. It has been a common mistake to think of Nazareth as a quiet spot far from the life of the great world, where Jesus was nurtured in seclusion. That is far from the truth. The village itself was not large, perhaps of but a few thousand inhabitants, and it was hid away in a basin of the hills. But above it rose the crest of these hills some fifteen hundred feet higher than the sea level. How often Jesus must have looked out from those heights upon "the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them." The smiling waters of Galilee lay scarce more than fifteen miles to the east. Only a few miles farther to the northwest was the Mediterranean. Near by ran north and south the great highway which for centuries joined the

ancient kingdoms of Egypt and Babylonia, along which so many armies had marched to victory or defeat. Just below, to the south, was the great plain of Esdraelon, where so many of Israel's battles had been fought. All about was the teeming life of Galilee, with its numberless villages and cities. The Roman world had crowded in here. Jesus heard the Greek language spoken and the Scriptures read in the Greek translation, and must have known the language himself, though he probably preferred the Aramaic. From the hills above his home he must have seen at times the Roman legions on their march, and Roman rulers with their brilliant following. Something of what happened in the great Roman world he knew, for in one of his parables he uses the incident of the embassy that was sent after Archelaus, when this son of Herod went to Rome to get his kingdom.

#### Directions for Reading and Study

Matt 1:18 to 2:23; Luke 1:26 to 2:52.

Write out the incidents of the annunciation and birth as given respectively by Matthew and Luke. Note the apparent differences and points of agreement.

Read carefully the songs of Mary, Zacharias, and Simeon. What book of writings in the Old Testament do they resemble? What is their central thought or interest? What do they suggest as to the character of these persons? With the aid of a Bible that has marginal references, make a list of the Old Testament passages that are used or alluded to. Compare Mary's song with 1 Sam 2:1-10.

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