

# EVANGEL

*The Good News of Jesus Christ*



# What's in a name?

## Do you know any sign language?

I know very little, but I do know one word: Jesus.

You make it by touching the palm of one hand with the middle finger of the other hand, and then repeating it for the other hand. That's to signify a nail imprint, that he died on a cross for you and me.

It's beautiful sign. Right in the name of Jesus you find good news. You can't sign the name of Jesus without being confronted with his death, his love.

Now you may not know sign language or sign at all. But you know what? Every time you speak the name "Jesus" it's the same.

*Jesus* is a Greek form of the Hebrew name *Joshua*. And the name *Joshua* means something like, "the Lord saves" or "salvation is from the Lord." The

most famous Joshua in the Old Testament was an instrument in God's hands to lead his people out of the terrible slavery in Egypt into the promised land of freedom and peace.

The Bible tells us that God himself was behind the name Jesus. It wasn't Joseph or Mary who picked out the name. It wasn't the name of a grandfather or great-grandfather. An angel from God gave the command to Joseph "You shall call him "Jesus" because he will save his people from their sins." (Matthew 1:21)

*From their sins.* That's why Jesus is born. God's rescue in Jesus will not be something superficial. There is sin on us – from even the time we are born, says the Bible. You don't have to teach a child to be selfish, to lie. And that sin separates us from



God. It is terribly enslaving. It results in such destruction, even death.

But in the life of Jesus the Lord brings salvation! Jesus is born to bear our sin – its guilt, its shame, its misery. Jesus is a Joshua – who brings sinners to a new land, to enjoy eternity, in the presence of God.

Believe in him, follow him, and you, too, will be led on a journey to glory and to God!

May your Christmas be filled with the knowledge of *Jesus*.

*Marc*



# Why does he do it?

**“It sure would have spared him a lot of suffering.”**

Someone said that to me the other day. Were they talking about how they should have put the little Smokey down before he got too ill? Or how they should have never started that home reno?

They were actually talking about *God*.

My friend and I were having a discussion about evil and sin in this world. Why did God let it all happen, we mused? He could have stopped the first sin, couldn't he? And when it went bad, why didn't God scrap it all and start over? “It sure would have spared him a lot of suffering.”

We often think of *our* suffering. But the Bible also reveals *God's* suffering. Before the flood, we're told God is grieved at what his world has become. God laments over our evil, our rebellion against him.

But that's just the beginning. Look at Christmas.

Jesus is born. But this is no ordinary birth. This is actually God entering our misery. The God who grieves now embraces our suffering. He is making our suffering *his* suffering. The birth of Jesus will culminate in the *death* of Jesus – a terrible, shameful death on a cross.

Why does he do it? “It would have spared him a lot of suffering.”

Clearly, God does not pick the path of least resistance. He doesn't do what's most



comfortable. Not for himself and – it's good to remember – not for us either.

In Jesus God will show the greatness of his *glory*. God created the world in perfection. But that did not exhaust the glory of God. He is also the God who is glorious in compassion, in mercy, in love. And he enters our suffering to reveal that glory.

He is the God who delights to wipe away tears. He is the God who has a love stronger than evil, stronger than death. There is tremendous beauty in forgiveness, redemption, reconciliation. We know it when we experience it ourselves. This is something divine. And God will show that glory in our dark world.

We live in a world that constantly wants to trivialize God. *The Eclipse of God* was the title of a book written a few decades ago. There is a devil, too, who likes nothing better than to slander God, to question his wisdom, his goodness. That was the start of the first sin in the beginning.

But God will lay every question about his majesty to rest. Christmas is the pledge.

God demonstrates his love is like nothing the world has seen. Nothing can stand in its way, not even the suffering of his own Son. God demonstrates that his wisdom is beyond any questioning. Even a humiliating cross can be his place to show his holiness, his truth, his grace.

The eternal God, greater than this universe, became one of us, tiny creatures, to save us. Who would imagine this? He came in such love – when we have shown such hatred – towards each other, towards him. He came in such humility – a babe, a man bearing a cross – when we live in such pride and arrogance.

And there is no lingering aftertaste of the bitterness of evil, either. Look at Christmas, at how God deals with evil. All that remains is a marvellous display of the greatness of God. Even God's own grief is turned to joy – in what his Son, his love, has accomplished. The end is greater than even the beginning.

In the depths of our darkness, he will show the greater depths of his glory, for his joy, for ours.

Doesn't that get you excited?

Marc

# The Wonder of Christmas

***“Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened. . .” Luke 2:15***

## “This Thing”

It began as a night like any other when a group of simple shepherds were chosen to experience a night like no other. They were simply watching their sheep when something astonishing happened before their eyes: the fantastic brilliance of the glory of the Lord shone all around them, and an angel of the Lord appeared, telling them that the Son of God had been born. As if that were not enough, a vast army of angels suddenly appeared, praising God. It was such a shocking experience that the Bible tells us the shepherds were terrified. For good reason! Who had ever witnessed something like this? They had been eyewitnesses to a birth announcement unlike anything the world had ever seen. What do you think your reaction would have been if you had seen and heard what they experienced?

After these remarkable events we read the text of Luke 2:15: *“Let us go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened.”* In particular I find the phrase “this thing” to be fascinating. Why speak that way? Could not the shepherds have called the birth of the Son of God something more fitting than “this thing”?

## A Wonder

You might argue that the poor shepherds were still recovering from the terror they felt, and their wits had not fully recovered. That’s possible. After a great shock or surprise people do not always express themselves in the most eloquent fashion. But there was more at work here. The shepherds understood that something extraordinarily special had just happened: a *wonder*.

Our understanding of wonders typically centres on what is excellent, rare, or superb. People have long admired truly exceptional creations, and have compiled lists of the best known wonders. The original Seven Wonders of the World included the Pyramids of Giza, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, and the Lighthouse of Alexandria, among others. The Seven Wonders of the Medieval World boasted the Great Wall of China, Stonehenge, the Leaning Tower of Pisa, and the Colosseum in Rome. Today it seems there are lists of all kinds of wonders, including the Seven *New* Wonders of the World, which you can even vote on!

## God’s Unique Creation

Yet a wonder in the Bible does not refer to a remarkable human achievement, but a miraculous event, an occurrence for which there is simply no plausible human explanation. A wonder is a divine miracle, a work of God alone!

People are generally fascinated by what appears to be miraculous or inexplicable. That’s why magic, the art of illusion, is often so popular. People are intrigued by the practice of making visible what defies the laws of nature.

Yet the wonders of Scripture, which are numerous, are all the product of the unique activity of God. He alone is the one who works wonders!

In the book of Exodus, Moses approaches a bush on fire that does not burn up. In the book of Daniel, the King of Babylon throws three Israelites into a fiery furnace, but later sees not three men walking unharmed in the flames, but four! Time and time again, we find in God’s Word that the Lord did what is impossible to explain

according to the natural laws of the physical world.

What about the wonder of Christmas? This too is inexplicable by human standards. How can God himself *become* a human being, so that he is both man and God? Mary, the mother of Jesus, had been told at an earlier time by the angel Gabriel that she would give birth to the Son of God, and that she was to give him the name Jesus. Her response was exactly what you might expect: *“How can this be?”* How is it possible? The answer she received speaks to the power of the Lord: *“Nothing is impossible with God.”* He is a God of wonders!

## Response to Wonders

When people today witness a feat of magic, how do they react? Often an audience will break out in applause, in laughter, or in disbelief mixed with curiosity. They have seen something, but they cannot figure it out. Mentally the question people happily wrestle with is: how is what I have just seen possible? And yet they ask the question with a smile on their face, because they know there is some trick, some technique that allows the magician to present what is ultimately an illusion.

In the Bible, people do not see God working magic tricks by sleight of hand or illusion, but they see genuine miracles. One of the remarkable characteristics of wonders is the reactions they evoke.

Over and over again in Scripture, the response of people to the wonders they witness is dramatic. There is often an element of fear involved, since people as a rule are afraid of what they cannot understand. The Christmas story has the shepherds utterly terrified by the sight they witnessed and the news they heard. That is to be expected.

Another aspect of the typical response to wonders is utter astonishment. Wow! Incredible! People who witness a wonder are utterly astounded. That is also what happens when it comes to the wonder of Christmas. After the shepherds saw Mary and Joseph, and the baby Jesus lying in the manger, they went off and told people about the child. Luke 2:18 tells us that *“all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds had said to them.”* They were filled with wonder at the wonder!

So when the shepherds spoke of *“this thing that has happened,”* they were not speaking in a derogatory or dismissive fashion. They were simply expressing the awe and amazement they felt concerning the miracle of Christmas. God had sent his own beloved Son into the world to save lost sinners! This was truly an incredible wonder.

## Purpose of Wonders

One question that bears asking concerns the purpose of wonders. Why does God work in this fashion? He could use any means in the way he operates, couldn't he? Would it not be fitting for him to operate in a more conventional way, according to what we as people are more used to?

As I mentioned earlier, a wonder of this world, like the Great Wall of China or the Pyramids of Giza are truly impressive, and they have been noted as truly exceptional creations. They showcase the intelligence, the ingenuity, the hard work, and the achievement of those who built them. When we look at these so-called wonders, we are impressed by the scale of achievement, and we think highly of the creators.

Yet God's wonders as miracles are completely different. They are not simply very talented

achievements; they are miracles, works that people *cannot* produce, no matter how intelligent they are, or how hard they work. God uses them to point people toward himself.

But there is something we should be very clear about. God does not work wonders because he wants the attention, or because he wants to show how powerful, how creative, and how clever he is. He is God, and he doesn't *need* anything from us.

The Lord works wonders because he uses them as a tool to bring people to faith. That is the key issue! He works so that people come to know him, to believe in him, and to enter into a relationship of love with him.

When God works a miracle in the Bible, there is always a *result*. God's work is effective, and he constantly accomplishes what he set out to do.

The wonder of Christmas is the miracle that God took on human nature, and became one of us, so that eventually he would die on the cross to pay for the sins of all those who put their trust, their faith, in him. This miracle of Christmas had an immediate effect of faith on those who heard about it.

After the shepherds had seen the baby Jesus and told others about the miracle, we read in Luke 2:20 that *“the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had seen and heard, which were just as they had been told.”* Through the wonder of Christmas, the Lord worked powerfully in the hearts and lives of these simple shepherds, so that in faith they praised God.

## The Wonder of the Wonder

The wonder of Christmas is not restricted to the miracle that happened at that time, as incredible

as it was. The wonder of Christmas is also the miracle that faith comes to us, who read or hear of the miraculous birth of the Lord Jesus. People today are changed and come to faith. People today are amazed at what God was willing to do for them!

The birth of Jesus Christ itself was in many ways completely normal, even humble, in its appearance. God had said through the angel: *“This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”* When people at that time saw the child, they did not see a child in any way different than any other in appearance. The circumstances may have been a little peculiar, with the child in a manger, but on the outside everything looked quite normal. The miracle was that the child was not only man, but also God! It took faith for people to believe it then, and it takes faith to believe that today.

That is what I hope and pray God will give to you as you read this, that the wonder of Christmas may result in a miracle in your life as well. I know by faith that God sent His beloved Son into this world to save wretched sinners like me. He gave the gift of his Son, and he gives the gift of faith to believe in him as well.

About 2,000 years ago, the Son of God was born into this broken, sinful world to rescue lost sinners. The first thing the angel of the Lord said to the angels was this: *“Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.”* That good news of great joy now comes to you as well. Believe and embrace this wonder! In faith you too can see *“this thing that has happened.”*

Hendrik Alkema

# Bible Story

Based on Luke 17:11-19

## ONE LEPER CAME BACK TO PRAISE GOD

Everyone in the land had heard about Jesus. As he traveled from village to village he spoke his words of healing. He made blind people see and lame people walk. He rescued people from demons and was able to raise dead people from the grave. Even the stormy sea calmed down at his voice.

Many people followed him on his travels. They marveled at his miracles. But they were also spellbound as he preached the good news to them. Jesus explained that he was the Son of God, who had come to earth to give his life for his people. Not everyone understood Jesus' words. But all who heard about Jesus wanted to hear what he said and see what he did.

One day Jesus and his twelve helpers were traveling to Jerusalem. The road they were taking was not far from the land of the Samaritans. As Jesus entered a village he heard some people calling him.

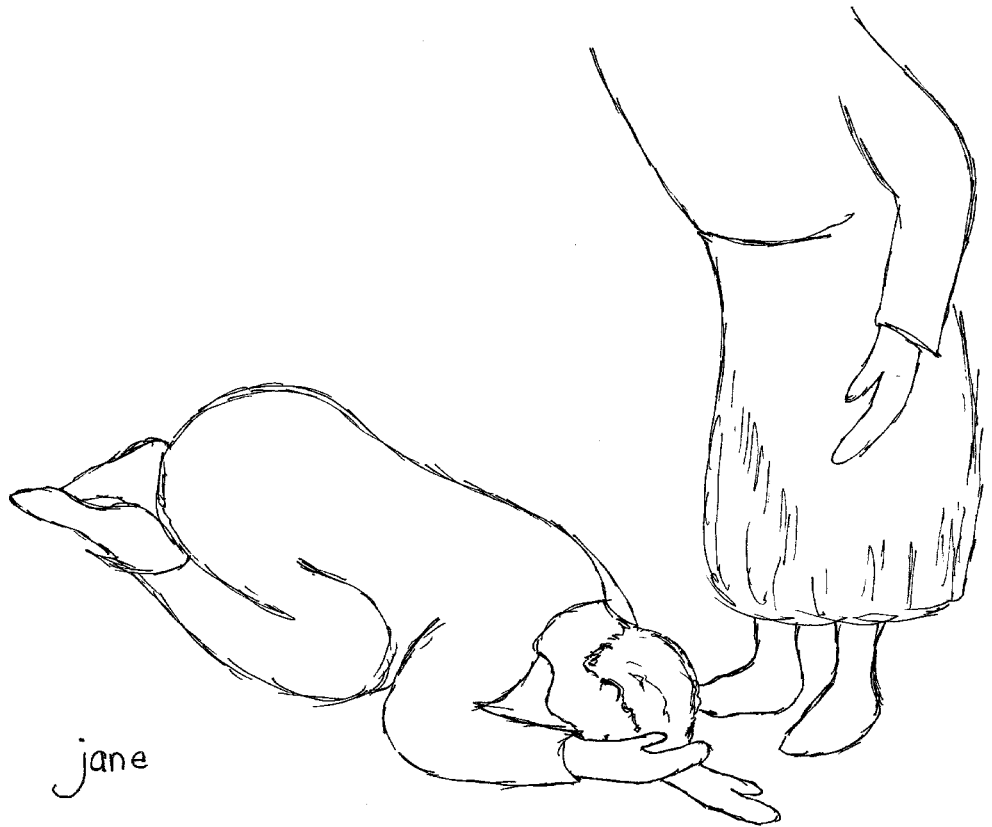
"Jesus, Master, have pity on us!"

He stopped and looked around. A group of ten men stood at a distance. Immediately Jesus knew why these men were not able to come closer. They were very sick. They had leprosy. Leprosy started with white spots on the skin, but over time it would destroy the body. Lepers were not allowed closer contact to other people. They were outcasts.

Again they were calling the Master.

"Jesus, have pity on us!"

Jesus took a few steps in the direction of the ten lepers. He saw the marks of their illness. He saw the pain of their loneliness. But he also saw the hope in their eyes.



He listened to their call for mercy and answered them with a command.

"Go, show yourself to the priest."

The ten lepers were surprised at these words. Why would they have to go to the priest? They were still leprosy. Only lepers who were healed had to go to the priest. Once the priest had concluded that the disease was completely healed, a leper could live with his family again.

The ten lepers did not question Jesus' command. Immediately they obeyed the words of Jesus and started to travel to the priest.

Soon their hope was fulfilled. On their way to the priest they noticed that they were healed. With new hope and joy they traveled on. After several days they arrived in Jerusalem. Great was their relief when the priest told them they were healed.

Nine of the healed lepers went back to their town. But one traveled back to his Healer. He asked around to find out which roads Jesus and his helpers had taken. At last he found his Lord. Calling out for joy he fell

down at Jesus' feet.

"Lord! You made me clean. I thank you!"

Jesus recognized the man.

"It is wonderful that you came back to thank me for being healed. Where are the other nine men of your group?"

"I don't know, Master."

"It is striking that you came back, and not the others. The others are children of Israel, but you are a Samaritan. Yet, you have shown great faith in the God of Israel. Stand up. Your faith has made you well."

The Samaritan stood up and went home. He was able to join his family again, because the God of Israel had healed him. Jesus was his Saviour.

Jesus still saves. As he healed the marks of leprosy for the Samaritan believer, so he heals the marks of sin that cling to us. We are clean in the eyes of God, because Jesus gave his life for us. Praise be to God, forever and ever!

Jane

# Activity Page

## LEPROSY

Leprosy was a terrible illness. Many white spots appeared on the skin. A leper was unclean. He was not allowed to live at home anymore, and he could not enter the temple either. A leper was an outcast. Lepers had to live outside the towns. Living outside the city walls they befriended each other. They were a family of outcasts.

## HEALED FROM LEPROSY

A person who thought he was healed from his leprosy had to show himself to the priest in Jerusalem. A leper was clean again after the priest declared him healed. As a sign of being clean again the healed leper had to sacrifice a lamb.

## SIN MAKES UNCLEAN

Sin is much like leprosy. It sticks to all that we do and say. Our hearts are not clean. Even when we try hard to be very good, we find out that we are not perfect.

## JESUS CLEANS OUR SINS

The Lord Jesus gave his own life as a sacrifice to pay for our sins. Believers are cleaned from the spots of sin through the blood of Jesus.

## OUR SACRIFICE OF THANKFULNESS

How thankful we are for being cleaned by Jesus! To show our thankfulness we offer a special sacrifice. We give ourselves to serve God with all our heart. As a result we start to love other people. Let us praise our Lord, who saved us from the power of sin.

## PRAISE THE LORD

*Praise the Lord for his acts of power  
Praise him for his majesty.  
Praise the Lord with the harp and trumpet,  
Praise him an eternity.  
Praise the Lord with the bells and cymbals,  
Praise him in all purity.  
Praise the Lord with the palm tree branches,  
Praise him who has set us free.*

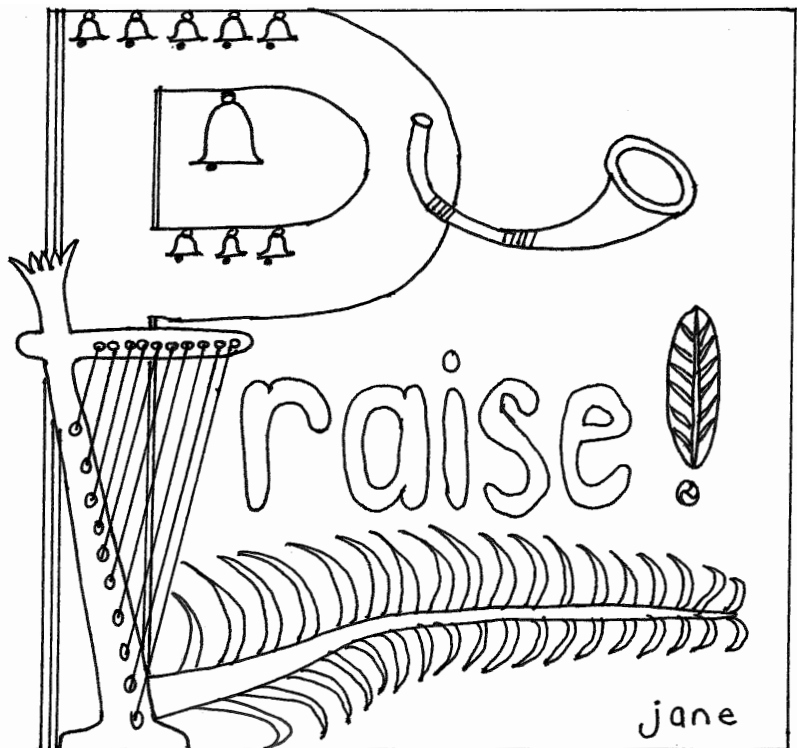
## FROM THE BIBLE

*Praise the Lord.  
Praise the Lord from the heavens,  
Praise him in the height above.  
Praise him, all his angels,  
Praise him, all his heavenly hosts.*

Psalm 148:1, 2

## WORD PICTURE

Thankful people praise God. Already in Bible times the believers used instruments to sing their praise to God. When Jesus entered Jerusalem as king the people waived palm branches and praised him by singing "Hosanna."



# A New Child – A New Hope

**“Hannah conceived and gave birth to a son. She named him Samuel.”**

*1 Samuel 1:20*

**There is no greater contribution that people can do for society than to conceive and give birth to a child, and raise that child well. Even if parents do not raise their child well, he or she can still become someone great and have tremendous influence. One woman raised a son who went and discovered America in 1492. The child of another set of parents discovered penicillin. Perhaps one of the children listed in the birth section of the news paper today will solve the problem of world poverty or global warming.**

Christmas is about the birth of a child. Mary gave birth to a son, and with her husband Joseph, she raised her son well. But Mary's son, Jesus, was also God's son. God the Father created the child in Mary's womb, and Joseph agreed to be his earthly father.

This child grew up and became a very important person. He became the saviour of the world, commander of all forces in heaven and on earth, and judge before whose throne every person born shall one day appear. It is hard to imagine anyone becoming more important than that!

The book of Samuel also begins by describing the birth of a child. Interestingly, there are quite a few books in the Bible that begin with the story of birth – Genesis, Exodus, Matthew and Luke. The story in Samuel 1 actually begins with sorrow.

A woman was being tortured by the taunts of another woman. This poor woman's husband, Elkanah,

had married two woman. That was quite common in that day. Elkanah's other wife was named Peninnah. Peninnah was very cruel to Hannah. She made fun of her because she could not have children. Elkanah would always try to comfort Hannah with his friendship and his love. “Do I not mean more to you than ten sons?” he would ask her.

Still, Hannah wanted God to deliver her from Peninnah's cruelty by giving her a son, so she prayed to God: “Please God, give me a child.” She spent a lot of time praying this. God took pity on her and granted her request. Hannah became pregnant and bore a son. When her son was born, she knew something wonderful had begun. She named him Samuel. Samuel grew up and would begin a massive spiritual revival in Israel. One of the results of his ministry in Israel was that he could appoint and install a king to rule over them. Samuel oversaw the beginning of a dynasty, that is a line of kings, that would lead to the day when Jesus ascended that very same throne.

Jesus fought against Israel's worst enemy, indeed, the worst enemy of the entire human race. The name of that enemy is “Death.” Though he was executed on a Roman cross, he became alive again. His power was greater than death. And he is still alive today. He will never die. So he also continues to reign as a king over that dynasty which began under Samuel's hand.

In a very real way, we are reaping the fruit of this special child born to Hannah.

If Samuel's birth could lead to such an amazing good thing, how much more shall not Mary's child bring forth the most excellent things in our lives?

This Christmas celebrate the birth of a child. There really is nothing more powerful that a person can do than to bear a child and raise him or her well. God wants you to be his child, and through the church, he wants to raise you well so that you become complete and mature in Jesus Christ.

*Paul Aasman*

## EVANGEL

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