

BETHLEHEM: Such a Strange Way to Save the World

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. The Gospel is the greatest (and strangest!) story you will ever hear (4Him song title)!

1. God wrote the story exactly according to His plan, but His plans are not like ours (**Isa. 55:8-9**):

⁸“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways,” declares the LORD. ⁹“As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts.”

2. God’s work often seems strange to us (**Isa. 28:21**):

The LORD will rise up as He did at Mount Perazim, He will rouse Himself as in the Valley of Gibeon—to do His work, His strange work, and perform His task, His alien [“unusual” NKJV & NLT] task.

3. Peter warned us not to be surprised by strange trials that God allows into our lives (**1 Pet. 4:12** NLT):

Dear friends, don't be surprised at the fiery trials you are going through, as if something strange were happening to you.

4. Many details of the story are deliberately included to stumble the proud and arrogant (**1 Cor. 1:18-29**):

*¹⁸For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ¹⁹For it is written: “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.” ²⁰Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? **Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?** ²¹For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know Him, **God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe.** ²²Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, ²³but we preach Christ crucified: a **stumbling block** to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.*

Isaiah uses two different Hebrew words (“strange” & “alien”) which elsewhere refer to strangers, fire, or gods

²⁵*For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength.*

²⁶*Brothers, think of what you were when you were called.*

*Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. ²⁷But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. ²⁸**He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things**—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, ²⁹**so that no one may boast before Him.***

5. Sandwiched between the prophecy of Messiah's virgin birth (Isa. 7:14), and the glorious proclamation of God's Son who would come to rule the world as "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (Isa. 9:6-7), there is another important Messianic prophecy in **Isa. 8:13-15**:

¹³*The LORD Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy, He is the one you are to fear, He is the one you are to dread, ¹⁴and He will be a sanctuary; but for both houses of Israel, **He will be a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.** And for the people of Jerusalem, **He will be a trap and a snare.** ¹⁵Many of them will **stumble**; they will **fall and be broken**, they will be **snared and captured.***

6. Peter reveals that this stone of stumbling and rock of offense is Christ Jesus (**1 Pet. 2:4-8**):

⁴*As you come to Him, **the living Stone—rejected by men but chosen by God** and precious to Him—⁵you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. ⁶For in Scripture it says: "See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in Him will never be put to shame."*

⁷*Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, "The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone," ⁸and, "**A stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall**" ["A stone of stumbling and a rock of offense (Gk. skandalon = 'scandal, trap, snare')" NKJV]. They stumble because they disobey the message—which is also what they were destined for.*

7. **Rom. 9:30-33:** ³⁰...*The Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have obtained it, a righteousness that is by faith;* ³¹*but Israel, who pursued a law of righteousness, has not attained it.* ³²*Why not? Because they pursued it not by faith but as if it were by works. They **stumbled over the “stumbling stone.”*** ³³*As it is written: “See, I lay in Zion a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall, and the one who trusts in Him will never be put to shame.”*
8. **Mat. 11:2-6:** ²*When John heard in prison what Christ was doing, he sent his disciples ³to ask Him, “Are You the One who was to come, or should we expect someone else?”* ⁴*Jesus replied, “Go back and report to John what you hear and see: ⁵The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. ⁶Blessed is the man who does not **fall away** [“be scandalized” (Gk. *skandalon*)] on account of Me.”*

B. We will look briefly at three of these strange “stumbling blocks” or “scandals” in the Gospel of Christ:

1. Christ’s birth: The scandal of Bethlehem
2. Christ’s early life and ministry
3. Christ’s death: The stumbling block of the cross

II. THE SCANDAL OF BETHLEHEM

A. Jesus was born at the perfect time (**Gal. 4:4** NKJV):

*But when the **fullness of the time** [“the right time” NLT] had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law.*

1. God had been waiting for the completion of many events, and when He chose to send His Son into the world, Israel was under Roman occupation—this was no accident or mistake!
2. Centuries earlier, God had given King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon a dream showing the succession of four kingdoms (1. Babylon; 2. Medo-Persia; 3. Greece; 4. Rome) leading up to the time of Christ; Daniel gave Nebuchadnezzar the interpretation (**Dan. 2:31-40**):

³¹*“You looked, O king, and there before you stood a large statue—an enormous, dazzling statue, awesome in*

Even though God inhabits eternity, TIME is very important to Him!

appearance. ³²The **head** of the statue was made of **pure gold**, its **chest and arms** of silver, its **belly and thighs** of bronze, ³³its **legs of iron**, its **feet partly of iron and partly of baked clay**. ³⁴While you were watching, a rock was cut out, but not by human hands. It struck the statue on its feet of iron and clay and smashed them. ³⁵Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver and the gold were broken to pieces at the same time and became like chaff on a threshing floor in the summer. The wind swept them away without leaving a trace. But the rock that struck the statue became a huge mountain and filled the whole earth.

³⁶“This was the dream, and now we will interpret it to the king. ³⁷You, O king, are the king of kings. The God of heaven has given you dominion and power and might and glory; ³⁸in your hands he has placed mankind and the beasts of the field and the birds of the air. Wherever they live, he has made you ruler over them all. **You are that head of gold** [Babylon]. ³⁹“After you, **another kingdom will rise, inferior to yours** [Medo-Persia]. Next, **a third kingdom, one of bronze** [Greece], will rule over the whole earth. ⁴⁰Finally, there will be **a fourth kingdom, strong as iron** [Rome]—for iron breaks and smashes everything—and as iron breaks things to pieces, so it will crush and break all the others.

3. Why would God wait to send the Messiah to Israel when Israel was under Roman rule—surely a time such as the reign of King David or King Solomon would have been better? But everything happened right on schedule—all things were complete and ready for Christ to come!

B. Jesus had to be born of a virgin (**Mat. 1:18-25**):

¹⁸This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but **before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit**. ¹⁹Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he **had in mind to divorce her** quietly. ²⁰But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy

Spirit. ²¹*She will give birth to a son, and you are to give Him the name Jesus, because He will save His people from their sins.* ²²**All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet:** ²³**“The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call Him Immanuel”**—which means, “God with us.” ²⁴*When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife.* ²⁵*But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave Him the name Jesus.*

1. What a scandal—Mary was pregnant before her marriage to Joseph was consummated, and he was ready to divorce her! Sounds like a soap opera! Surely this could have been avoided!
2. And to make the story even more scandalous, Matthew lists Jesus’ ancestors (Mat. 1:1-17) which include liars (Abraham), cheats and deceivers (Jacob), adulterers and fornicators (David and Judah), murderers (David and Jehoram), and idolaters (Solomon); four women are listed (not normally done in genealogies!), three of whom were Gentiles and adulteresses—one (Rahab) was a prostitute! Surely God could have chosen a better family tree for the Son of God!
3. NOTE: The eternal Word had to become flesh (John 1:14) and Jesus had to be fully human so that He could die as a mortal for mankind’s sins (**Heb. 2:14-17**):

¹⁴Since the children have flesh and blood, He too shared in their humanity so that by His death He might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—¹⁵and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. ¹⁶For surely it is not angels He helps, but Abraham’s descendants. ¹⁷For this reason He had to be made like His brothers in every way, in order that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that He might make atonement for the sins of the people.

- C. Jesus was born in a humble stable in Bethlehem (**Luke 2:1-7**):

¹In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. ²(This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of

Syria.)³ *And everyone went to his own town to register.* ⁴*So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David.* ⁵*He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child.* ⁶*While they were there, **THE TIME CAME** for the Baby to be born,* ⁷*and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped Him in cloths and placed Him in a manger [feeding trough for livestock], because there was **no room for them in the inn.***

1. Mary and Joseph would never have gone to Bethlehem had they not been under Roman rule (the fullness of time!), but Messiah had to be born in Bethlehem to fulfill the word of the prophet Micah (Micah 5:2)!
2. No room for the Promised One in the inn—He was born in the filth of a barn fit only for cattle and sheep! What a welcome for God’s only Son!
3. Jesus entered the world in humiliation—without pomp, privilege or prestige (**Phil. 2:5-8**):

⁵*Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:* ⁶*Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,* ⁷*but **made Himself nothing**, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.* ⁸*And being **found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself** and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!*

- D. The birth of the King of kings was announced only to lowly shepherds (**Luke 2:8-18**):

⁸*And there were **shepherds living out in the fields** nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night.* ⁹*An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.* ¹⁰*But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.”* ¹¹*Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; He is Christ the Lord.* ¹²***This will be a sign to you: You will find a Baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.*** ¹³*Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,* ¹⁴*“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom His*

favor rests.”¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.”¹⁶ So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the Baby, who was lying in the manger.¹⁷ When they had seen Him, **they spread the word** concerning what had been told them about this Child,¹⁸ and **all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.**

III. CHRIST’S EARLY LIFE AND MINISTRY

A. Magi visit the Christ Child (**Mat. 2:1-11**):

¹After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during **the time** of King Herod, **Magi from the east came** to Jerusalem² and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? **We saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him.**”³ When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.⁴ When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born.⁵ “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written: ⁶“But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of My people Israel.””⁷ Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them **the exact time** the star had appeared.⁸ He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and make a careful search for the Child. As soon as you find Him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship Him.”⁹ After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the Child was.¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.¹¹ On coming to the house, they saw the Child with His mother Mary, and they **bowed down and worshiped Him.** Then they opened their treasures and presented Him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh.

1. Several years had passed since Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem, but this is the first instance of anyone worshiping Him.
2. God had to bring men from faraway lands in the east (possibly Persia, Arabia or India) to worship the Messiah because His own people did not recognize or receive Him (John 1:11).

B. Joseph had to flee to Egypt to escape Herod's murderous plot (Mat. 2:12-23):

¹²And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route. ¹³When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the Child and His mother and **escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the Child to kill Him.**" ¹⁴So he got up, took the Child and His mother during the night and left for Egypt, ¹⁵where he stayed until the death of Herod. **And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called My Son."**

¹⁶When **Herod** realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he **gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi.**

¹⁷Then **what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled:** ¹⁸"A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more." ¹⁹After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt ²⁰and said, "Get up, take the Child and His mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the Child's life are dead." ²¹So he got up, took the Child and His mother and went to the land of Israel. ²²But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee, ²³and he **went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets: "He will be called a Nazarene."**

1. Note once again the importance of God sending His Son in the "fullness of time" (Gal. 4:4) during the Roman occupation of Israel (perfectly aligning with Daniel's prophecy in Dan. 2:40-44 concerning the fourth kingdom which would be strong as iron—Rome): The prophecies of Jesus going to Egypt and Jeremiah's prediction of great mourning for the slaughtered children in Ramah could not be fulfilled otherwise.
2. Of all places, Jesus spent His early childhood (possibly 3 years or more) in Egypt—what a strange twist to the story!

3. Jesus finally returned to Nazareth, a little-known and despised town in Galilee—certainly not a place fit for the Messiah (**John 1:45-46**):

⁴⁵*Philip found Nathanael and told him, “We have found the One Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.”* ⁴⁶*“Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?” Nathanael asked. “Come and see,” said Philip.*

- C. So many events in Jesus’ early life seem strange, but they all had to happen because God planned them and even predicted them through the prophets hundreds of years before.
- D. God waited until Jesus was thirty years old to begin His ministry—a ministry that would only last a little over three years (**Luke 3:21-23**):

²¹*When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as He was praying, heaven was opened* ²²*and the Holy Spirit descended on Him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: “You are My Son, whom I love; with You I am well pleased.”* ²³*Now Jesus Himself was about thirty years old when He began His ministry.*

- E. Many were scandalized by the fact that Jesus was an ordinary man—a carpenter’s son (**Mat. 13:54-58**):

⁵⁴*Coming to His hometown, He began teaching the people in their synagogue, and they were amazed. “Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers?” they asked.* ⁵⁵*“Isn’t this the carpenter’s son? Isn’t His mother’s name Mary, and aren’t His brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas?”* ⁵⁶*Aren’t all His sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things?”* ⁵⁷*And they took offense [Gk. skandalizo; “escandalizaban” RVR1960] at Him. But Jesus said to them, “Only in his hometown and in his own house is a prophet without honor.”* ⁵⁸*And He did not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith.*

- F. Jesus never wrote a book or made a movie; He had no TV, radio or Internet; He had no car, train or jet for transportation—He walked everywhere except for an occasional boat ride on the Galilee and a donkey ride into Jerusalem; He had a rag tag team of fishermen and tax collectors who rarely understood

what He was saying; and yet, in just three years, JESUS TURNED THE WORLD UPSIDE DOWN! He divided TIME into B.C. (before Christ) and A.D. (the year of our Lord)!

IV. THE STUMBLING BLOCK OF THE CROSS

- A. **1 Cor. 1:18-19, 22-23:** ¹⁸*For the **message of the cross is foolishness** to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.* ¹⁹*For it is written: “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.” ...²²Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom,²³but we preach **Christ crucified: a stumbling block** to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles,*
- B. The Jews thought their Messiah would come as a conquering king who would liberate them from Roman oppression—they never expected Him to come as a humble servant who would die on a Cross as a cursed criminal, despite Isaiah’s astounding prophecy (**Isa. 53:1-12**):

¹*Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?* ²*He grew up before Him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. **He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to Him, nothing in His appearance that we should desire Him.*** ³*He was **despised and rejected by men**, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces He was despised, and we esteemed Him not.* ⁴*Surely He took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered Him **stricken by God**, smitten by Him, and afflicted.* ⁵*But He was **pierced for our transgressions**, He was **crushed for our iniquities**; the punishment that brought us peace was upon Him, and **by His wounds we are healed.***

⁶*We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.* ⁷*He was oppressed and afflicted, yet He did not open His mouth; He was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so He did not open His mouth.* ⁸*By oppression and judgment He was taken away. And who can speak of His descendants? For **He was cut off from the land of the living**; for the transgression of My people He was stricken.* ⁹*He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in*

*His death, though **He had done no violence, nor was any deceit in His mouth.** ¹⁰Yet it was the LORD's will to crush Him and cause Him to suffer, and though the LORD makes His life a guilt offering, He will see His offspring and prolong His days, and the will of the LORD will prosper in His hand.*

¹¹After the suffering of His soul, He will see the light of life and be satisfied; by His knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and He will bear their iniquities. ¹²Therefore I will give Him a portion among the great, and He will divide the spoils with the strong, because He poured out His life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For He bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

- C. The cruel punishment and death described by Isaiah could only be fulfilled 700 years later in the “fullness of time” during the Roman occupation of Israel. Crucifixion had been used by the Assyrians, Persians, and Greeks, but historians write that the Romans “perfected crucifixion,” especially in the Holy Land in the time leading up to Christ’s death, where thousands were executed by crucifixion.

1. Paul explained how death on the cross was for the worst criminals who were under God’s curse (**Gal. 3:13**):

*Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by **becoming a curse for us**, for it is written: “Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.”*

2. **Deut. 21:22-23:** ²²*If a man guilty of a capital offense is put to death and his body is hung on a tree, ²³you must not leave his body on the tree overnight. Be sure to bury him that same day, because **anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse.** You must not desecrate the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance.*

- D. Even Christ’s own disciples did not understand the Cross at first (**Luke 24:20-21**):

²⁰*The chief priests and our rulers handed Him over to be sentenced to death, and **they crucified Him;** ²¹but we had hoped that He was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place.*

- E. But everything changed on the third day: RESURRECTION
(Rom. 1:4):

Declared to be the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead.

- F. God had orchestrated every detail according to His set purpose and plan (**Acts 2:22-24**):

²²Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through Him, as you yourselves know. ²³This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put Him to death by nailing Him to the cross. ²⁴But God raised Him from the dead, freeing Him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on Him.

V. CONCLUSION

- A. The Gospel story is the strangest story you will ever hear—strange to us, but not to God!
- B. Every detail was carefully planned by the Sovereign Lord and every event took place at just the right time!
- C. Hundreds of prophecies were fulfilled in Jesus' birth, life, death, and resurrection—they were predicted centuries ahead of time through God's prophets.
- D. Many of the events that seem strange to us were deliberately planned by God to “scandalize” or “trip up” the proud and unbelieving.
- E. Without any doubt, this is the GREATEST AND THE MOST AMAZING STORY EVER TOLD! Merry Christmas!