



THE
GLORY
of CHRIST

R.C. SPROUL

THE
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of
CHRIST

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Choosing My Religion

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THE
GLORY
of
CHRIST

R.C. SPROUL



P U B L I S H I N G

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*In memory of Edmund Clowney, who faithfully
pointed people to the glory of Christ.*

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P R E F A C E

Glory. The word is charged with meaning. It sets the hearts of Christians soaring. The soul is lifted up by the contemplation of the glory of God and of His Only Begotten Son. It is Christ in His glory who is the object of our worship and adoration. As Christians we join the communion of saints and the host of heaven in lifting up praise and honor to Him.

Jesus' life was marked by humiliation and suffering. His humanity served as a veil that concealed the splendor of His deity. Yet there were moments when His glory shone through. It was as if the vessel of His human nature was not strong enough to conceal it at all times.

There is a Latin phrase that was popular among sixteenth-century theologians: *finitum non capax infinitum*. The phrase conveyed two ideas. The first was that the finite cannot grasp the infinite. In this sense it calls attention to the incomprehensibility of God. It points to the limits of our human minds to grasp fully the greatness of God. At our best our understanding of Him is feeble.

The second idea the Latin phrase conveyed was that the finite cannot *contain* the infinite. So it was in the incarnation. Though the fullness of the Godhead dwelt in Christ bodily, it could not be restricted to His human nature nor held in subjection by it.

This book is not intended to provide a full examination of the life of Jesus. Rather, it focuses on moments in Jesus' life when His glory burst forth and was displayed to those around Him. It considers those points where His humiliation gave way to exaltation.

Whenever I write a book I like to give the proper acknowledgments to those who helped in the process. In the case of this volume there is a special measure of thanks that is necessary. I made the foolish mistake of writing the first six chapters on a hard-disc word processor without putting them on backup floppy discs. In the middle of my work my computer broke, and it was apparent that I had lost the chapters completely. We sent the machine to several repair shops over a course of weeks, only to be told that nothing could be done to retrieve the work. Then Chuck Swindoll heard of my plight and urged me to send the broken computer to his son, whom Chuck described as a "computer whiz." Within a few days, Curt Swindoll retrieved my material and solved my problem. To him goes my profound thanks and appreciation. I also want to thank Dr. Wendell Hawley of Tyndale House; my wife, Vesta; my administrative assistant, Maureen Buchman; and Ligonier's director of data processing, Gwen Weber, for all their help in the preparation of the manuscript. Special thanks also to Stephen Lang for his kind and gentle editorial help and the improvements he brought to this work.

Orlando, March 1990

CHAPTER ONE

GLORY

IN THE

FIELDS

*While shepherds watched
their flocks by night
All seated on the ground,
The angel of the Lord came down,
And glory shone around.*

NAHUM TATE

THERE IS SOMETHING almost mystical about Palestine. It is the Holy Land, the focal point of the pilgrim's quest for sacred time and space. A journey there is like traveling through a time warp.

Visiting the Holy Land involves more than culture shock. There is the added shock to the soul that comes from entering the arena of the incarnation. History becomes almost tactile. The flesh tingles at the sensation of suspended time. It's in the air. It's etched upon the barren rocks. The landscape, the vista, the roads, the Bedouin nomads, the undersized donkeys—they all say that this is where the Lord of the cosmos visited us.

There is a vast difference between the *historical* and the *historic*. Everything that happens in time and space is historical. But only the significant is historic. The *significant* is so-called because of its "sign" character. Something that is significant points beyond itself to something greater. No land is more packed with the historic and the significant than Palestine. Here the events that define all history took place. The very meaning of my life, the very roots of my existence are embedded in the stones of this land.

There are words in Luke's account of the nativity of Jesus that burn in my heart every time I hear them. They are the words shepherds spoke to each other after being visited by an angelic host: "Let's go to Bethlehem

and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." I went to Bethlehem as part of my pilgrimage to Israel. Bethlehem is a small town about five miles southwest of Jerusalem. The village had a rich history even before the birth of Jesus. The tomb of Rachel was in this locale (Genesis 35:19). It was the setting for much of the Old Testament Book of Ruth. The most famous Old Testament citizen of Bethlehem was David. Here he was anointed by Samuel. It was of this town that the prophet Micah wrote:

*But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
though you are small among the clans of Judah,
out of you will come for me
one who will be ruler over Israel,
whose origins are from of old,
from ancient times.*

(Micah 5:2)

My visit to Bethlehem followed the normal pattern of tourists. We went by bus to the traditional site of the birth of Jesus. The site is marked by the Church of the Nativity, originally built by Byzantine emperor Justinian I in the sixth century. There we found the grotto of the nativity carved out of rock and lined with marble in a cave beneath a crypt.

The splendor of this church stands in marked contrast to the crudeness of the original manger scene. The biblical record of Jesus' birth places a strong accent on the humble accommodations made necessary because of the lack of room in the inn.

Each year during the Christmas season we hear about the lowly aspects of Jesus' birth. We hear of swaddling

clothes, a manger, the arduous journey of a peasant woman and her husband. These humble realities underscore the humiliation that marked the entrance of Christ into the world.

With these aspects of the birth of Jesus we are made aware of His willingness to empty Himself of the glory He enjoyed with the Father from all eternity. His lowly entrance into the world involved a veil that concealed His eternal majesty. It was His willingness to subject Himself to this humiliation that provoked Paul's hymn of Philippians 2:

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:5-11)

This hymn celebrates the honor of Christ that is restored to Him after His earthly humiliation. It reflects both upon His descending from heaven and His subsequent ascending to heaven. Before He could ascend to glory He had to first descend from glory.

In 1969 I met an elderly gentleman, Henry Barraclough. He had written a hymn that became famous—"Ivory Palaces." He told me that when he was a young

man living in Philadelphia he heard a stirring sermon based on Paul's hymn in Philippians 2. After the sermon, Henry sat down and wrote the words to the hymn: "Out of the ivory palaces, into a world of woe...." Jesus descended to a world of woe, with His divine glory hidden beneath the veil of His humiliation. The veil was there, but it was not opaque. It allowed rays of light to shine through from time to time. In His most inglorious moments, in moments of radical passion and debasement, there are glimpses of the radiance that belonged to His divine nature.

Even in the humble circumstances of His birth there was a breakthrough of glory. It occurred in the fields outside Bethlehem. During my visit to Bethlehem I was listening to the tour guide's speech inside the Church of the Nativity when I felt drawn to leave the building and go outside. I wandered away from the tour group and walked to an old stone wall that marked the border to the fields of Bethlehem. I sat on the edge of the wall and gazed out over the vast expanse of empty fields. I closed my eyes and imagined that it was night—*that* night, the night the shepherds were keeping watch over their flocks. I thought about what it must be like to have a job that requires vigilance twenty-four hours a day. I remembered working night shifts in a factory and feeling the tedium that goes with the late hours.

Monotony goes with a job that follows the same routine day after day. The shepherds had spent countless nights in the fields outside Bethlehem. There would normally be little excitement.

But on the night Jesus was born something spectacular took place. The plains of Bethlehem became the theater for one of the most spectacular sound-and-light shows in human history. All heaven broke loose.

Luke tells us what happened:

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 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. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests." (Luke 2:8-14)

The angelic visitor was surrounded by the glory of God. The glory was shining. This glory did not belong to the angel himself. It was God's glory, signifying His divine mode of being. It was the divine splendor that shrouded the heavenly messenger, a visible divine radiance.

The basic meaning of the word *angel* is "messenger." The angel is a spirit being who serves in the presence of God and who may be dispatched as a herald or messenger. He is a bearer of a divine announcement. His credential is seen visibly by the accompaniment of the shining glory of God.

In Luke's record the immediate response of the

shepherds to this intrusion is stark terror. The older translators rendered the text, “And they were sore afraid.” As I sat on the wall by the edge of the fields of Bethlehem I thought of the terror the shepherds experienced. I tried to imagine my own terror if I encountered the same phenomenon. It would be like crossing a dimensional zone, staring at a vision few mortals have ever witnessed. I trembled even to think of it. I thought of the response of Habakkuk when God appeared to him: “When I heard, my body trembled; My lips quivered at the voice; Rottenness entered my bones; and I trembled in myself, that I might rest in the day of trouble” (Habakkuk 3:16, NKJV).

When the shepherds of Bethlehem quaked in fear, they were admonished by the angel: “Do not be afraid, for behold I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:10-11, NKJV).

Every human being longs for a savior of some type. We look for someone or something that will solve our problems, ease our pain, or grant the most elusive goal of all, happiness. From the pursuit of success in business to the discovery of a perfect mate or friend, we make our search.

Even in the preoccupation with sports we show a hope for a savior. As a sports season ends with far more losers than winners, we hear the cry from cities across the land—“Wait till next year!” Then comes the draft or a new crop of rookies, and the fans pin their hopes and

dreams on the new kid who will bring glory to the team. The rookie, the new client, the new machine, the news that will arrive in tomorrow's mail—all are invested with more hope than any creature can possibly deliver.

The burst of light that flooded the fields of Bethlehem announced the advent of a Savior who was able to do the task.

We note that the newborn Savior is also called "Christ the Lord." To the astonished shepherds these titles were pregnant with meaning. This Savior is the Christ, the long-awaited Messiah of Israel. Every Jew remembered the promise of God that someday the Messiah, the Lord's anointed, would come to deliver Israel. This Messiah-Savior is also Lord. He not only will save His people but He will be their King, their Sovereign.

The angel declares that this Savior-Messiah-Lord is born "unto you." The divine announcement is not an oracle of judgment but the declaration of a gift. The newborn King is born *for us*.

Next the angel announced the giving of a sign that would verify the truth of the declaration: "And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger" (Luke 2:12, NKJV). The sign of the manger child contrasts with the explosion of glory in the field. Just a short distance away from the scene of light and sound will be found the Savior cloaked in humility and lowliness.

When the ethereal chorus was finished, the shepherds discussed the matter among themselves. One wonders

about the tempo of the discussion. It could hardly have been calm. The men were obviously beside themselves with fear, excitement, awe, and delirious joy. They decided to leave at once for the promised sign.

The Scriptures tell us that they left with haste to search for the birthplace of the Christ. Again we wonder if in their haste and excitement they left their flocks unattended. Such an action would be unthinkable for any responsible shepherd. Did they leave one or more of their comrades behind? If so, how would those left behind feel about missing this adventure of all adventures? The Bible is silent on these questions and we are left with mere speculation about them.

Luke concludes the narrative of the shepherds by writing:

So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told. (Luke 2:16-20)

The shepherds went back to their flocks. The return trip was marked by unbridled adoration and praise. These men would never be the same. They had seen with their eyes and heard with their ears the manifestation of the glory of God.