

WHEN GOD STARTED A FAMILY EPHESIANS 3:14-15

For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named...

When God came to Earth He did so to start a family.

Not a conventional family... of dad, mom, sister and brother - but a spiritual family that includes all races, all languages, all cultures, all nationalities, and all ages...

The Savior came to take from the ranks of humanity, and establish a forever family - *one formed on earth, but destined for heaven*. As Peter calls it, “**a chosen generation... a holy nation, God’s own special people.**”

Our Lord left the cozy confines of Heaven for a rough and tumble Earth - with the goal of building a family.

Here in Ephesians 3, Paul tells us that after 30-odd years among us - sharing our muck and mire - Jesus ascended back to heaven... **mission accomplished!**

And now in His wake, there’s a whole family that has taken and carries the matchless name of Jesus Christ.

When we think of starting a family we think of an eager young man leaving his parents, and going out to find a *wife*. The two of them establishing a *life* together.

And then comes a baby! Offspring is a sign that the young man is well on the way toward his goal. He’s taken on responsibility. He’s becoming a grown man.

But with God's family, the baby was the beginning...

Jesus didn't wait until He was a young man to start His family. He began His family building as an infant.

Even as a lowly baby, He invited the world to follow Him... *Mary and Joseph embraced Him first. Then Shepherds were summoned. And then Persian kings were guided to His side...* And every Christmas, folks from around the world, answer the same invitation.

More wise men and women return to the Bethlehem manger, and marvel at the Infant it once cradled.

Once, a mom and daughter were unpacking the family's ceramic nativity set. It was time to decorate for Christmas. The three year old was able to identify each piece as it was pulled from the wrapping paper...

"Here's a donkey... That's Mary... He's a shepherd..."

But when the little girl saw the ceramic baby Jesus molded into the manger as a single piece, she got excited. She shouted, *"Here's Jesus in His car seat!"*

Isn't it interesting, if the Almighty God had come to Earth in modern times He would've needed a car seat.

Imagine, *God in a car seat!* The God who steers the universe - who's sovereign will cuts the channel of history... would need to be strapped in, and buckled into an infant carrier, before He could ride in your car.

As one author writes, “A child was born who... was the high and lofty One made low and helpless. The One who inhabits eternity comes to dwell in time. The One whom none can look upon and live, is delivered in a stable, under the soft, indifferent gaze of cattle. The Father of all mercies puts Himself at our mercy.”

When a young man enters a room the Old Guard will keep him at arm's length. Ah, they'll be cordial, but their initial conversation is intended to size him up.

CCSM has a distinguished group of older gentlemen who meet every Friday morning. They call themselves the OFC. *Their wisdom is renown.* And if a young whipper-snapper stumbled in one morning spouting off the naivety of youth, they'd shut him up in a heartbeat.

Here's my point, a young man - even a grown, young man - lacks the drawing power of a little baby...

But if you brought a newborn into that room of older men everyone of them would crowd around the bassinet to catch a glimpse... They'd ooh and ah at a baby! The hardest of men grow soft around an infant.

In fact, bring a baby into the sanctuary after church on a Sunday AM, and he or she will capture the crowd.

All the ladies will line up to take turns holding a baby.

Some moms even wait a few weeks to bring their newborn to church knowing everyone will want a peek.

And this is one reason God came into the world as a baby! It was the most inviting - welcoming - non-threatening - least-intimidating form He could've taken.

Have you noticed, that the mere sight of a baby elicits a smile! Nobody curls up his nose at a baby - or rolls his eyes - or stiffens his chin - or clenches his teeth. You don't get defensive around a baby. A baby is as disarming a creature as you'll ever meet.

And this is why Jesus came into the world, *in a form that would cause the toughest person to crack a smile.*

Look at a baby and it softens your heart - you drop your guard - a person becomes more open... Yes, it's marvelous to behold, but when God came to the Earth to start His forever family, He came as a baby boy!

Former news correspondent, Harry Reasoner, once commented on the Christmas story, "The appearance of the Lord of the universe in the form of a helpless babe... is so revolutionary a thought that it probably could only have come from God..."

Almost nobody has seen God, and almost nobody has any real idea of what He's like. And the truth is, that among men, the idea of seeing God suddenly and standing in a very bright light is not necessarily a completely comforting and appealing idea...

But everyone has seen babies, and most people like them. If God wanted to be loved as well as feared he moved correctly here. If He wanted to know people as well as rule them, He moved correctly. If God wanted to be intimately part of man, He moved correctly.

Christmas is the story of the great innocence of God the baby - and it has such a dramatic shock toward the heart that if it is not true, nothing is true." God came to Earth as a baby, and that Baby came to start a family...

But God added to His family in a rather odd manner.

First, a teenage girl, an unwed mother named Mary, joined the family... then a non-descript carpenter named Joseph... then some rowdy shepherds.. and then some strangers that could've passed for terrorists... *Not the first candidates I would've picked out to join my family.*

Everybody knows from their backyard football experience that when you pick your team you look for the strongest, fastest, smartest, and most talented. I don't think either Mary, or Joseph, or the shepherds, or the wise men qualified in any of those categories.

This was an odd group to add to your family!

At the time, Mary had a reputation.

The angel who visited her knew *she was a virgin...* God and Mary knew *she was a virgin...* Later Joseph knew she was a virgin... But you can be sure no one else in Mary's hometown believed *she was a virgin!*

Years later, when the Jewish leaders throw jabs at Jesus, they say, "**We were not born of fornication...**" Thirty years later, and Mary still wore a scarlet letter.

When the angel greeted Mary, he told her, "**Rejoice, highly favored one... blessed are you among women.**"

But there were fellow Jews who saw her as a tramp who turned up pregnant. For all of their married lives Joseph and Mary *wore a stigma and bore a shame*.

In fact, all the first invitees to the manger to join God's family were people with an unsavory reputation!

Take for example the shepherds.

Shepherds were roughnecks and law breakers. They were the ancient equivalent of gang-members.

When shepherds came to town, people locked their doors. *Chain up the donkey... keep your daughter in her room*. The sheriff was put on high alert - a deputy was posted to keep an eye on the sheep gang.

It reminds me of the defendant who was asked by the Judge to explain the charges against him. *"I was just doing my Christmas shopping early, Your Honor."*

The Judge was taken back, *"That's not a crime! How early were you shopping?"* The man replied, *"O, about three hours before the store opened."* That could've been a shepherd! They had that sort of reputation.

As did the wise men!

The mysterious riders who entered Jerusalem were foreigners - aliens. And there was no immigration to check their credentials when they crossed the border.

They dressed in weird clothes - and funny hats - and spoke a strange language. The Jews - even the Jewish King Herod - viewed them with fear and suspicion.

The wise men were actually from Persia. They were Babylonians. If it were today they could've been Iraqi Republican Guard, or a Hezbollah hit squad from Iran.

These were the same folks, who a few hundred years earlier, had ridden into Jerusalem with spears and drawn swords. They tore down the walls of the city, set fire to the temple, and slaughtered the citizenry.

The Jews they didn't murder, they took back as prisoners. If Al-Queda had been recruiting operatives at the time the wise men might've been candidates.

Yet, amazingly, God invited them to the manger!

First century Jews would've seen the convoy of oriental magi and accused God of fraternizing with the enemy. *What is the God of Israel doing inviting strangers - even His enemies - to join His family?*

It reminds me of how God treats us!

Romans 5:10, **“when we were enemies we were reconciled to God...”** When God saved us He also could've been accused of consorting with the enemy!

One year a kindergarten class planned to recite the Christmas story in their own words. The parents and relatives thought the performance was delightful.

All the kids were super cute, but the little girl who stole the show was the one who kept referring to the **Virgin Mary** as the **Urchin Mary**... An **"urchin"** is **“an uncivilized, street kid.”** Imagine, calling Mary an *urchin!*

But that wasn't far from the truth! Mary and Joseph were peasants. They had little money, and no place to sleep. They spent the night in a barn. Mary and Joseph and their baby were among the ranks of the homeless.

And soon they'd be on the run. They had to flee to Egypt to avoid arrest. The holy family was on the lam! O yes, the *Virgin Mary* was also the *Urchin Mary*...

It reminds me of the little girl who played Mary in the grade school pageant. On the night of the performance she insisted on abandoning her costume, and wearing her new, red dress. Neither the play's director, or her helpers, or the girl's parents could persuade her to wear her costume. The little girl insisted, if she couldn't wear her new red dress, she wouldn't go on stage.

And it was too late to find a replacement...

Finally, the director apologized to the crowd, "Ladies and gentlemen, due to circumstances beyond our control, Mary, the mother of Jesus, will appear tonight in a new, red dress." But that's when the little girl shouted out from backstage, "*And if Mary had been given a new, red dress she would've worn hers, too.*"

The point though, is that the Urchin Mary had no new, red dress! Joseph was a middling carpenter, trying to support a family on a hourly income. There was no room in the budget for any new, red dresses.

Mary rode to Bethlehem in tattered rags, and bedded down to give birth in a stone-hewn feed trough. The only softness came from the saliva-stained straw.

Eight days later, rather than offer a lamb, Joseph made the pauper's sacrifice of two turtledoves, for Jesus to be circumcised. These were displaced and disenfranchised folks - and they'd just registered for a fresh round of taxes. Their plight was getting worse...

Yet these were the people with whom God wanted to start a family... *the Urchin Mary, ole blue-collar Joe, a gang of rowdy shepherds, and freakish strangers.*

Hebrews 13:12 reveals that first-century Jewish believers would find forgiveness for sin and a relationship with God beyond the margins of Judaism.

The verse points out how in the OT, the Priest burned the sacrifice outside the camp of Israel. This is why Jesus was crucified outside Jerusalem's gates.

In essence, God went beyond the boundaries of typical religion - of the day's Judaism - to make mankind right with Him. God saves His family on the fringes - outside the mainstream and limits of tradition.

His salvation is new, and atypical, and radical...

And if God saves His family out on the edge - on the fringes - then why not *start* His family on the fringes?

Rather than go to Jerusalem's religious hierarchy, and invite the priests to the manger - rather than invite King Herod and his royal court - or the aristocrats and the bureaucrats... *God does the unthinkable!*

He goes out on society's edges... *to a peasant couple - to a few grungy shepherds - to some weird-o wise guys* - and invites the least deserving and most surprising to be part of the Father's eternal family.

Here's the glorious truth... *rich or poor, accepted or despised, stained or innocent, stranger or home boy, royal or ragged* - there's room for you in God's family!

The baby who wasn't given a room in the inn is the Savior, who is ready to accept everyone else who couldn't have gotten a room that night either.

As Phillips Brooks wrote, "Everywhere, everywhere, Christmas tonight! For the Christ child who comes is Master of all; no palace too great, no cottage too small." *Christmas reaches where everyone lives.*

Charles Wesley once spent the night locked in a jail cell with prisoners who were scheduled to be executed the next day. Because of his witness for Jesus the men who died, did so persuaded that their sins were forgiven, and their Lord was preparing for them a home in heaven... God was with them in their darkest hour!

And this is why Jesus is called, "Immanuel" - "God with us." Jesus joined us on spiritual death row to give hope - to provide us a pardon. Jesus loves us enough to join our plight. *Now He invites us to join His family.*

No matter who you are - or what you've done - or where you've been... the Babe in the manger invites you to come and be a member of God's forever family.

During WW2 families that had sons away on the battlefield hung a star in the window of their home.

A father was explaining this custom to his little boy, when the child looked up into the night sky, and saw a star in the heavens. He shouted, "*Look, God hung a star in his window. He must also have a Son in the war.*" And that is exactly what Christmas is about!

God sent His Son into battle. Jesus fought against bigotry, self-righteousness, doubt, fear, lust, anger, hypocrisy, bitterness, hopelessness, slavery, pride...

And then, He took our sin upon His shoulders, and paid its penalty in full. Jesus has reconciled us to God.

That means because of what Jesus did, God buried the hatchet! He now holds out to us an olive branch.

Today, God is in heaven willing to let bygones be bygones... He's no longer angry with us over our sin. Instead, God is welcoming us. He's waving to us, and inviting us to embrace Jesus and join His family.

I'll bet you didn't know the origin of the mistletoe. Druids of Northern Europe believed that mistletoe had healing powers. It could cure disease and various ailments. *It was even the cure for broken relationships.*

Thus, when two enemies found themselves under a tree with mistletoe, they saw it as a sign that they should lay down their weapons and be reconciled.

When Christian missionaries arrived they used this pagan tradition to illustrate what Jesus has done for us.

Jesus ended the hostility between God and man. On the cross God laid down His weapons, and now He asks us to do the same. Through the work of Jesus, we can be reconciled to God and truly know His love!

In 1994 two Americans were invited to Russia to teach morals and ethics to former Soviet communists who were void of both. In an orphanage the men had an opportunity to tell the children the Christmas story...

And to help the kids remember they brought crayons, and construction paper, and glue, and tape from which the kids could make their own manger scenes.

One of the Americans recalls a six year old boy named *Misha*... As he looked at Misha's manger scene, he noticed two babies in the manger - *not one*.

He asked Misha why there were two babies?

Misha recited the story he'd been told, but when it came to Mary putting the baby Jesus in the manger he started to ad-lib... "When Mary laid the baby in the manger, Jesus looked at me and asked me if I had a place to stay. I told Him, 'No, I have no mama and papa, or a place to stay.' Jesus told me I could stay with Him... So I got into the manger, and that's when Jesus told me I could stay with Him - for always."

Hey, when God started a family He began with a baby. And then He added to His family - *peasants, and carpenters, and roughnecks, and freaks* - and since that first Christmas God has proven over and over, again and again that no matter who you are, if you trust in Jesus, you are welcome to join Him in the manger!

Christmas is all about the love of God - and the extent to which God is willing to go to share His love with the least and the lowest - *all the way to a manger*.

Realize, God's love is a love that's always stooping, and reaching, and inviting, and embracing, and never-ending. It's been said, "The manger is the one place you're not too bad to get in - or too good to stay out."

But here's God's desire... Once you join Jesus in the manger, He wants you to help invite others to join! He wants you to communicate His love to those nearby...

Even if that means leaving your circle of friends, and the warmth of loved ones... and reaching out to people on the fringes - *the nobodies - the rejected - the forgotten - the peasants, and rowdies, and strangers...*

There was no room for Jesus in the Inn...

Is there room around your Christmas table for someone who has nowhere to go?... Is there room in your holiday season for the one who's usually passed over?... Is there room in *your family* for the person Jesus died to save and make part of *His family*?

1 Corinthians 13 is called “[The Love Chapter](#).” I’m sure you know it... “[Though I speak with the tongues of men and angels, but have not love, I have become a sounding brass or a clanging cymbal... Love suffers long and is kind...](#)” and so forth. 1 Corinthians 13 defines real love, and how we should love one another.

But here’s a Christmas version of the love chapter...

[“If I decorate my house perfectly with plaid bows, strands of twinkling lights and shiny balls, but do not show love to my neighbor, I'm just another decorator.](#)

[If I slave away in the kitchen, baking dozens of Christmas cookies, preparing gourmet meals and arranging a beautifully adorned table at mealtime, but do not show love to people, I'm just another cook.](#)

[If I work at the soup kitchen, carol in the nursing home and give all that I have to charity, but do not show love to my own family, it profits me nothing.](#)

If I trim the spruce with shimmering angels and snowflakes, and ice cycles, and put strings of lights all over my house, and attend a myriad of holiday parties, and even make it to church on Christmas Eve, but do not focus on the Christ, I have missed the point.

Love stops the cooking to hug the child.

Love sets aside the decorating to kiss the husband.

Love is kind, though harried and tired.

Love doesn't envy another's home that has coordinated Christmas china and linens. Love doesn't yell at the kids to get out of the way, but is thankful they are there to be in the way. Love doesn't give only to those who can give in return, but to those who can't.

Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails. Video games will break, pearl necklaces will be lost, golf clubs will rust. But giving the gift of love will endure.”

It's love that makes for the merriest of Christmases!

If this year, you've yet to get into the Christmas spirit... if you've been plugging along, but with little enthusiasm... If this Christmas season has been just a ho-hum, humbug Christmas... *here's a suggestion...*

Don't just focus on *your* family. Let the love of Jesus spill over to others. Go out on the edge. Take a trip to the fringe. Reach out to someone on the outside. Be kind to a person who won't be able to return the favor!

Show love to a person who's poor - or has stained their reputation - or a rowdy type - or the guy who's a little weird - or the family who's foreign to your culture - or to the newcomer to the neighborhood. Invite a Mary, a Joseph, a shepherd, a wise man to join God's family!

Take a chance and be like the baby in the manger.

Be humble - be inviting - be welcoming - be approachable... try to make an addition to God's family.

It reminds me of the wife who couldn't think of a gift to give her husband, Mike... They had just recently attended their son's wrestling match. His team had gone up against an inner-city squad. And since their son's team was far better equipped and far better trained they won hands-down - ever single match.

The outcome had upset her husband. Mike wished that at least one of the inner-city kids had won a match.

He knew how disheartened the kids must've felt.

That's when his wife thought of his present...

She went to the local sporting goods store and bought miscellaneous headgear and wrestling shoes, and sent them anonymously to the inner-city team.

Then she put an envelope in her family's Christmas tree telling her husband that what she had done was her gift to him. When Mike opened the envelope and read the note he couldn't stop beaming. It was his favorite gift. It was all he could talk about all day.

Well, each year thereafter, this wife followed the tradition she had established. There was always an envelope for her husband in the Christmas tree...

One year they sent a group of mentally challenged kids to a hockey game... Another year a check went to a family whose house burned down - *and on it went...*

Though the kid's were grateful for *their* gifts - every Christmas dad's envelope was the main attraction.

But the story doesn't end there...

I want you to listen as this wife finishes her story... "We lost Mike last year to cancer. And when Christmas rolled around, I was so wrapped up in grief, I barely got the tree up. But Christmas Eve found me placing an envelope in the tree, and in the morning, it was joined by four more. Each of our kids, unbeknownst to the others, placed an envelope in the tree for their dad..."

Because this wife went out of her way to **show** God's love, she blessed her husband while he was alive; then left a legacy to him in the heart of his kids!

She had the true Christmas spirit...

She followed in the footsteps of a God who left heaven, climbed into a manger, and reached out in love... And as a result of what Jesus did - today, God's whole family in heaven and earth bears His name.

Let me close with one final story, told by a mom who attended her son's Grade School Christmas program.

When her son's class rose to sing the song entitled, "Christmas Love," the children brought to the platform placards with different letters printed on them...

The kids lined up in order, then turned over the placards, revealing the succeeding letter in the words "CHRISTMAS LOVE." When the card with the "C" was flipped, everyone said in unison, "C is for Christmas."

The next kid turned over the "H"... "H is for Happy."

And on it went with each letter... But when the kid holding the "M" accidentally turned his letter over upside down everyone snickered and laughed... That is, until all the remaining letters were revealed...

When the song finally ended the string of letters that stretched across the stage read "CHRIST WAS LOVE."

What everyone assumed had been a mistake wasn't such a mistake after all... Christ was, and is, and will always be love! Christmas is about His love for you!

The Baby in the Bethlehem manger not only demonstrates God's love for us, but He invites us to love God in return - then to show His love to the people closest to us... *and even to people not so close...*

Never forget, Christmas is about the people on the ragged edges of life. It's about going out on the fringes, and loving those that only God would think to love.

Above all, Christmas is about reaching, and reconciling, and welcoming, and inviting... **For when God started a family - He began with a Baby!**