



**A** new baby changes your life.

There's no doubt about it. Goodbye sleep as you know it. "Isn't she sweet? She looks just like you", you hear someone say as you gaze with wonderment at the tiny, wrinkled, Gollum-like<sup>1</sup> face peering curiously back at you. Nevertheless, it's wonderful, you'd not have it any other way. I'm reminded of the lyrics of one of my favourite songs, *how sweet to hold a new born baby!*<sup>2</sup>

Christmas is, of course, a season for children. Its origins go back to many customs and ideas, but especially to the biblical story of the birth of Jesus Christ. It's about a baby who was born into dangerous times in the Middle East.

Bethlehem, which today is part of the Palestinian-controlled West Bank, was not a safe place shortly after Jesus was born in 4BC. As we'll read later, if you were a boy under two years of age, it was better to be neither seen nor heard. This was because of King Herod the Great of Judaea, who, as well as being one of the great builders of his day and a personal friend

of the Roman general Mark Anthony (of *Anthony and Cleopatra* fame), was also paranoid about losing his kingship, which had been awarded to him by the Senate in Rome and subsequently re-confirmed by the future emperor Octavian (Augustus). In fact, such was his paranoia that he killed some of his family members in order to protect himself. "...children he certainly slew, including three of his own sons, along with his wife, his mother-in-law, and numerous other members of his court. Throughout his life, he blended creativity and cruelty, harmony and chaos, in ways to challenge the modern imagination"<sup>3</sup> It was Octavian who described Herod as having greatness of spirit, and Herod became well-known for his patronage of the arts and for sending aid in times of famine to areas in need. It was towards the end of Herod's long reign that Joseph took his heavily pregnant wife Mary to his home town of Bethlehem.

King Herod feared who Jesus would become. The account of what happened is found only in the biblical book of Matthew and it fits in well with what we know of Herod's character and with his obsession about the security of his own kingly

position. Matthew explains that some wise men, in all probability part of the Persian religious caste, came from the east to Jerusalem with a question, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?" (Matthew 2:1 NIVUK)

This question was a threat to the status quo. For a start Herod did not have the legitimacy of having been born into the King David's royal Jewish line. Also, this spelt out danger to the chief priests and teachers of the Jewish law for two reasons: first, although many did not like Herod because he was not a real Jew, they did not want to destabilize the power of Herod who had, after all, re-built the Second Temple in Jerusalem, and in particular had beautifully and meticulously renovated its sanctuary; and, secondly, these wise men said that they wanted to worship this new-born king, which was tantamount to an act of heresy.

We don't know where Herod was when he heard the news of the visit of the wise men. Was he in his ornate palace at Herodium, eight miles south of Jerusalem? What we do know is that Herod gave the Jewish religious élite the task of finding out what the wise men could possibly be talking about. They would have pulled out the scrolls of the Old Testament, and in it found a prophecy:

*"And thou Bethlehem Ephrathah art little to be  
among the thousands of Judah,  
yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me, that shall  
be the ruler in Israel:  
whose goings forth have been from the beginning  
and from everlasting"*  
(Micah 5:2 1599 Geneva Bible)

The superstitious Herod would have immediately feared these words. He asked the wise men to find the child and report back to him. When the wise men found the child in a house<sup>4</sup> in Bethlehem, they fell on their knees and worshipped him. They then gave him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, but they had a dream about how dangerous Herod was and, therefore, they decided not to tell Herod the child's whereabouts. Instead "they returned to their country by another route" (Matthew 2:12 NIVUK).

This frustrated and infuriated Herod, and he ordered what has become known as *the Slaughter of the Innocents*. "He gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under" (Matthew 2:16 NIVUK). It seems so cruel to us, and yet, when we think of the Rwandan



*The Massacre of the Innocents* by Leon Cogniet

genocide that took place only 20 years ago, or of the children killed in Hitler's holocaust, or, to be more up to date, of the innocent young lives destroyed in the current fighting in Syria, it's not so strange.

The modern poet, Felicity Currie, in her 2007 war poem, *It out-herods Herod*, asks, "Where can a baby now be safely born?". "Now Bethlehem's a walled, forbidden place", she continues, and throughout Gaza there is "a sanctioned slaughter of the innocent"<sup>5</sup>. Events in the Middle East have worsened considerably in the ensuing ten years.

In 2012 Currie, a British Jew writing from troubled Palestine, wrote her *Impulses of Deeper Birth*<sup>6</sup>, in which she offers more reflections on the birth of Christ compared to the present situation in Israel today. What we need to do, she says is to recreate "a world of could and would". We need a "birth that lasts and changes everything".

Christians believe that Christ's birth is a birth that lasts and changes everything.

Christ's birth ushered in a new age of possibility and of real change. The lasting legacy of his birth continues. In fact, the child Jesus brought us a gift: the hope that only salvation brings. In that sense we were there in that in that house with the wise men all those years ago.

A new baby changes your life, and the baby Jesus changed everything eternally for us and for the whole world.

#### Footnotes:

- 1 Gollum is a fictional character from J. R. R. Tolkien's novel *The Hobbit*. He made horrible gurgling noises, and was wrinkled and unattractive to look at.
- 2 From *Because He Lives* by Gloria Gaither and William J. Gaither.
- 3 Quoted from page 40 of the December 2008 National

Geographic, the Holy Land's Visionary Builder, Herod by Tom Mueller.

4 Finding the baby Jesus in a house does not contradict the story found in Luke about the stable and the manger. Archaeology has shown that sometimes the animals were kept in a section of the house reserved for them, which is likely to be where Joseph and Mary were accommodated after they could not find a room in the inn.

5 [http://www.warpoetry.co.uk/war\\_poetry\\_new.html#Poem\\_December\\_2007](http://www.warpoetry.co.uk/war_poetry_new.html#Poem_December_2007)

6 [http://www.warpoetry.co.uk/israel\\_palestine\\_war\\_n\\_peace\\_poetry.html](http://www.warpoetry.co.uk/israel_palestine_war_n_peace_poetry.html)

# TIME TO READ THIS AGAIN?

BY JOSEPH TKACH

A friend of mine was telling me about the first time he and his wife saw their new home. Viewing it online, they realized it was empty, so they decided to drive by for a closer look.

To their chagrin, they could only peek inside – the windows were partially blocked by curtains and blinds. It wasn't until an estate agent let them inside that they got the full picture. Some of what they found was what they expected, but some was not what they expected at all.

Their experience reminds me of the struggle we Christians, given our finite minds, often have understanding (“seeing”) such profound concepts as infinity, eternity and time. Trying to understand is like trying to see every nook and cranny of the inside of a house by looking through the front door keyhole. There is much to see, but the view is obstructed. Though we seek to understand, it's a struggle – a collision of the finite with the infinite.

As we read about these concepts, though we recognize the words, we're not always sure what we've just read. Sometimes this also happens when reading books about theology! For example, when reading Barth's *Church Dogmatics* at times I write more than a page of notes on a couple of his paragraphs, and then wonder whether I've understood what he wrote! It certainly takes work and patience to grasp Barth, but I find it well worth the

effort – it's like digging through rock in search of gold. Sometimes you come across amazing nuggets without realizing what you've found. But then you have that “aha moment” – it's like someone has turned on the lights in a dark tunnel and you're now able to see the gold right there in your hand.

One of the nuggets in Barth's writing is his teaching that the Incarnation is the proper starting point for all true doctrine. The Incarnation is a theological term that

refers to the birth of Jesus Christ, when he became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:14). Since the pre-incarnate Son of God is the Old Testament's Creator and Lord, and the incarnate Son of God (Jesus) is the New Testament's Saviour, it makes sense that everything truly does begin and end with Jesus Christ – he is the “Alpha and Omega” (Revelation 22:13).

Along those lines, Barth wrote this: *Whenever Holy Scripture speaks of God as eternal, it stresses his free-*

*dom. It takes him emphatically out of the realm of man and men, away from all history and all nature. It sets him at the beginning and end of all being and on high above it and unfathomably beneath it. (Church Dogmatics, vol. II.1, page 609)*

This statement takes some pondering to mine the gold it contains, so let's ponder together. Barth is linking God's eternity with his freedom, making the point



that for God to be *truly God*, he must be *truly free* – he must not be dependent on anything, and that includes time itself. This makes sense, for were God constrained by time, he would have to do things, allow things, or orchestrate things within a particular period or epoch of time. Were that the case, God would not be *truly God* – he would cease, for example, to be omnipotent. Barth is helping us understand that time cannot be God’s equal, nor a constraint upon him, nor a boundary that hems him in.

The idea of God being constrained by time arises not from Scripture but from paganism, including the Greek mythology concerning Kronos, who is one of the pantheon of gods known as the Titans. This myth does not align with the biblical revelation that God, who is eternal, created everything and there isn’t anything that exists that he did not create, time included. The Bible reveals that time has no power over God – there is nothing that has power over him, nor can anything exist prior to him. There cannot be anything that exists eternally with the same freedom including time itself. Either God has divine freedom and is the creator of time, or God is subservient to it and therefore not truly God.

By definition, God is self-existent. God is *wholly other* – dependent on nothing, existing himself, before he created time. God exists in divine timelessness. Or, we can say, he has his own kind of time – time that is uncreated and eternal. The uncreated Father has and makes time for the uncreated Son (eternally!), and the Son has and makes time (eternally!) for the Father, all in the Holy Spirit. Again, that’s a nugget that takes time to ponder!

With that thought in mind, let’s consider now the Incarnation in relation to time. The apostle Paul wrote this: “When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law” (Galatians 4:4 ESV). In the phrase, “When the fullness of time had come,” Paul says more than we may have noticed. This phrase does not mean that God was waiting around for a specific moment in time to act. Barth helps us understand by noting that *eternity* is something constant (immutable) while *time* is transient (mutable). Time was created and flows forward and is changing

– moving from the present into the past in anticipation of the future. God, who inhabits eternity, is not subject to change like that. Nevertheless, in the *fullness of time*, eternity entered time.

The apostle John made a similar point in writing this: “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). This profound statement tells us that God has revealed himself within time and space without ceasing to be eternal. God, who inhabits eternity, takes time into himself and, in his incarnate Son, Jesus Christ, takes on temporality. Just as the Incarnation means divinity has taken on humanity, it means that eternity subsumes time – it includes within it temporal time. In Jesus, God has made time for us, taken time for us. God has redeemed our time by graciously bringing

it into fellowship and communion with his own time – his eternity.

Barth argued that neither time or eternity can be understood independently from the Incarnation. This reality fits hand-in-glove with the paradox of Jesus being both fully human and fully divine. Leaning too far in either direction leads to the heretical errors of Ebionitism (which diminishes Jesus’ divinity) and Docetism (which diminishes Jesus’ humanity). God is both temporal and eternal – temporal because eternity has subsumed

temporality, and eternal because time has no power over him. There is a huge deposit of gold to ponder here!

The Incarnation reveals that, by grace, eternity includes time and does not exclude it. In the person of Jesus, the eternal entered time without ceasing to be eternal, raising us temporal beings through Jesus to participation in God’s eternity. In other words, *Jesus’ coming in the flesh changes time for all time*. We are in Christ and he is in the Father, and the Father is in him, and we are included in their eternity. Note Paul’s words:

“Because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us



with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.” (Ephesians 2:4-7)

Yes, you and I live in time, yet because of Jesus, we also live in eternity. This is an amazing nugget—a profound truth we struggle to grasp, but struggle we must, though it’s like peeking into a home through a crack in the curtains. Once we enter the home, we’ll see much more than we have ever dared to expect.

In the meantime, let’s hold fast to the nuggets we have – the precious knowledge that, already, we are alive

with Christ; already, we have been raised to new life with him; and, already, we have been seated with him in the heavenly realms. He has shared with us his eternal life while we remain creatures, his created children. As the apostle Paul put it, “What is sown [created] is perishable [mortal, subject to death], what is raised is imperishable [not subject to death]...” (1 Corinthians 15:42 NRSV).

We celebrate the profound, joyous truth that through the Incarnation Jesus has entered time and became one of us in order to take us out of time and bring us into his eternity.!



## *If You Came With a Price Tag, How Much Would You Cost?*

*by Richard Fowler*

**B**eep, beep...

So there you are, beating the queue at the self-service check-out. As you scan your weekly combination of culinary cuisine, you carefully place the items in the bag as not to trigger the machine into one of Britain’s most time-wasting supermarket statements: “Please call for assistance,” (even though you did place it in the bagging area!)

But this time something happens that takes you by surprise.

All items scanned...beep...goes the machine, again. It

has scanned your hand! A picture of you comes up on the screen...and then the price!

US\$9,000,000...

You pause. Take a step back. And realise you have just been priced! But, is that all your worth?

Suddenly, you become quite the indignant shopper. This time you are not questioning the fact that your buy-one-get-one-free toothpaste has failed to be taken off your bill; but rather, that the pricing of your beloved self is not to your expectation.

Now, you may not be quite the narcissistic, ego-centric, modern citizen that today's society seems so good at producing, but the thought flashes into your mind...\$9 million – is that it?!

Well, yes! Reported in the latest New Scientist, that is what your life is worth. This figure is calculated from how we use limited resources e.g. deciding how much to invest in building safer roads.

In fact, you and I might find the putting of a price tag on human life not only morally degrading, but something usually confined to Wild West movies with their wind-torn 'Wanted' posters. Or has it?

You may be surprised to find out that your life **does** have a price tag on it...and it's not \$9 million (...cue awkward silence...)

Nope, it's not even the \$5 million bounty that was on Osama bin Laden's head (in fact, some say that, in total, it cost America \$2 trillion to finally get him – war and all.) Neither is it the depraved amount that it cost to buy a slave in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century which was about \$1100 (roughly \$30,000 in today's money.) Nor is it the risky \$400 to \$1,500 that it costs for a person to be smuggled across the Mediterranean Sea, which, for more than 2500 people this year, has cost them their lives.

For so many, life seems oh so cheap. Often the decisions we make seem to devalue human life; do we not see that in Syria when governments bomb hospitals and aid convoys? And sometimes, if we are honest with ourselves, our own selfish and immoral actions devalue the life we could be living. I guess this is what it is meant when the Bible says that we have been “sold under sin” (Romans 7:14, NKJV): our actions mean that we are underplaying our value – that we have a disconnected relationship with God.

But with the price tag that comes with you and me there is one thing we must remember...

God wrote that price tag!

Therefore, it's a value not subject to deflation, nor determined by markets; it

is a price determined by what God was willing to pay to buy us back – to, once again, forgive us and connect us back into a relationship with Him.

So, what, you may ask, is written on our human price tag? Well, actually...JESUS!

The living God who created life, set the value of that human life. And so valuable were we to Him that He gave his only begotten Son to purchase us back from sin.

You see, in the heavenly supermarket, God did not get out His holy wallet and hand over some divine dollars to buy us back from the empty life we so often end up living. God, instead, sent His Son, giving Him life as a baby, so to grow up and give “Himself a ransom for all...” (1 Timothy 2:6) to pay our price tag, a price tag that demanded a life for our life.

It does not matter if you think you are damaged goods, your value does not go down. Remember, Jesus paid for you.

We have been bought with a price!

Are you willing to be bought back?

References:

- 1 <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/mediterranean-migrant-smugglers-100-life-jacket-human-trade-misery-africa-middle-east-1496598>
- 2 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/05/31/more-than-2500-refugees-and-migrants-have-died-trying-to-cross-t/>
- 3 New Scientist, October 2016



# Pondering Time!

by Cliff Neill



It's incredible to contemplate that midday in London is 10 minutes ahead of Bristol, 16 minutes ahead of Plymouth and even 2 minutes ahead of Windsor!

It was Royal Mail that led the way and it was the introduction of mail coaches and their timetables in 1784 that began to ring the changes that became inevitable with the arrival of the railways in 1827. Eventually time was standardised all over the country to GMT – but it's interesting that the Bristol Corn Exchange clock still has two hour hands and still shows both times, one 10 minutes behind the other.

Today I took some time to think about time! Have you ever done that? I think it's important because our lives are regulated by it, we use it to remember events such Remembrance Day, Christmas and the New Year, and also to celebrate milestones over a lifetime; we use it to count our years here on mother earth and many, many other important things. And whether we are millionaires, Kings, Queens, Presidents or very ordinary people, we are all get allotted 24 hours a day: that's 1,440 minutes, or 86,400 seconds – no more, no less! But, just like water, it runs through our fingers and we either waste it or grab it to use it wisely. It's funny, or maybe not, but we talk about killing time when really the truth is – it is time that quietly kills us!

*Carpe Deum* comes to mind – “Seize the day”, but, actually, the complete quote from Horace (65-8 BC), is “Even while we speak, Time, the churl, will have been running. Snatch the sleeve of today and trust as little as you may to tomorrow.” Wise words, wouldn't you agree?

The Scottish poet Harvey Scott wrote this amusing little story about how time gets away from us:

*Old Father Time,  
I saw the old thief, Father Time,  
Come hirpling down the road;  
He had a sack upon his back,*

*Lost minutes were his load.  
He opened it and showed me  
Not minutes, but a host  
Of years, decades, a century  
And more, of minutes lost.  
“I want to buy a year,” I said,  
“And I shall pay you well;”—  
“If this earth's mould were finest gold,  
To you I would not sell,  
For I have minutes stolen from kings,  
From Milton, Shakespeare, Bach,  
How could you buy such precious things,  
Your common gold is trash”...*

*He tied his sack and said, Farewell,  
Young man, I've got my fee,”  
For, while I tried to make him sell,  
He stole an hour from me!*

I thought this story was funny but very true, and, in truth, that's what happens to us and we can't buy it back, or save it, or bank it; we only get to use it! What do they say in supermarkets? WIGIG—“when it's gone, it's gone!” There's a special lesson in this; because if we are working towards a goal in life, a desire to accomplish something, don't put it off, because there will come a point in “time” when it will no longer be available!

Life is the here and now and we need to cherish each day, filling up our allotted time with worthwhile things. I'm sure you have read Rudyard Kipling's poem “If”, these few lines speak to me – *If you can fill the unforgiving minute with sixty seconds worth of distance run, yours is the earth and everything that's in it, and – which is more – you'll be a man my son.* Or as one biblical writer puts it, *Live life, then, with a due sense of responsibility, not as men who do not know the meaning of life but as those who do.*

Or, as my favourite writer “Anon” puts it: *To realise the value of one millisecond, ask the athlete who won silver at the Olympics!*

Time is priceless – let's use it wisely!

# Speaking of Life: The Stillness



In 1988, Rosemary Johnson was a violinist for the Welsh National Opera. Her future looked bright, until – a car accident changed everything. After waking up from a coma, doctors informed her that she would never be able to move again. And for the next thirty years, Rosemary’s violin remained silent. But now, almost thirty years later, thanks to some cutting-edge technology, Rosemary is beginning to make music again. Working with specially designed software, she can altar notes and musical phrases by simply focusing her eyes on different colored lights on a computer. When

I read about this, I was reminded of a principle that we sometimes forget – the stillness of God.

Sometimes it can feel like we’re stuck, that no matter how many prayers we offer to change our circumstances, God remains unmoved – silenced. But does that mean he’s stopped working? Does that mean he is absent? No, far from it! At the end of his earthly ministry, Christ reminds the Church – **“And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age”** (Matthew 28:20 NIV).

The last words were a reminder that while Christ’s visible presence was about to depart, his spiritual presence by the Holy Spirit would remain close. Jesus gives us both a promise and a descriptor of his character: God’s presence and activity in our lives is constant and it will never be withdrawn from us. And yet, throughout

history he has used stillness to shape the character and stories of those through whom he’s worked powerfully. People like Job, Abraham, Joseph and John the Baptist experienced it. Even Christ experienced it in the garden of Gethsemane. In that moment, I’m sure Jesus experienced the doubt and confusion we so often feel when confronted with the stillness of God. But did that mean God had stopped working? Of course not! In fact, God was about to accomplish our salvation – his most important work in all of history!



So while at times we too might feel anxious as we enter into the stillness with God, we should remember that like Rosemary, outward stillness doesn’t mean that nothing is happening. His silence can be a sign of his closeness and love! The beautiful music of God’s work in our lives is always playing. We may not be hearing it yet. But one day we will hear it in all its glory – forever.

I’m Joseph Tkach, speaking of LIFE.

***Speaking of Life is now on TV! It is used by UCB (United Christian Broadcasters) in between longer programmes and is aired on UCB on Thursdays and Fridays between 7.15 - 7.30 am and between 1.45 and 2.00pm, on Saturdays between 6.45 and 7.00 am., and on Sundays between 1.45 and 2.00 pm. These timings may vary.***

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