



## He Came Anyway

It was the first Christmas—Joseph, Mary, Jesus and the animals in the stable looking so calm and serene. At least year after year that’s what the Christmas cards ask us to believe. If we accept the greeting card version of the first Christmas, we must assume that Jesus was born in a Disney-perfect sanitized petting zoo.

But Christmas cards are not photographs, they are romanticized artistic impressions. They don’t tell the real story. If biblically and historically accurate Christmas cards were ever produced, then Hallmark would probably sell scratch n’ sniff greeting cards that release the fragrances of a barn! But who would buy greeting cards that smell up our homes? On the other hand, maybe there is a market. Maybe there would be people to whom many would be tempted to send a “scratch n’ sniff real-first-Christmas” card!

### The Real First Christmas

If all you know about the first Christmas is a greeting card Christmas, then you might very well visualize an idyllic picture of the first Christmas. What really happened? An unmarried teenage girl gave birth to her firstborn. In her heart she knew that she was a virgin, but she was tortured with what everyone else would surely say—about her and her son. Mary was young, but she was old enough to know that talk about an unmarried teenager giving birth would not go away. She, Joseph and Jesus would live with nasty gossip for a long time. Jesus’ birth was a scandal that compromised religious values and morality.

Mary was ready to deliver Jesus, but Joseph and Mary couldn’t find a place to stay, so they were forced to welcome their son into the world in a barn. There was no room in the inn, no room in a clean or warm environment, so a barnyard had to do.

King Herod heard that a king was going to be born in Bethlehem, and Herod wasn’t ready to give up his throne. Just to make

sure this pretender to his throne would be “taken care of” King Herod ordered all the boys in Bethlehem two years old and under to be killed. As far as Herod was concerned, there was no room for Jesus in Bethlehem.

You know the story—an angel warned Joseph of the planned massacre, so the new family escaped to Egypt, returning only when Herod died. So Jesus, God in the flesh, came to save us, but there were no parties, no Christmas trees, no glitter, no lights, no marching bands, no pageants and no ceremonies. There was no room in Judea (the people to whom he had come) so the family had to move to Egypt, one of the places most despised by Jews. The name of Egypt itself was synonymous with brutal suffering and slavery inflicted on the Jews centuries earlier.

Joseph, Mary and Jesus became fugitives, running from the very people to whom Jesus came, forced to seek refuge in a place believed to be God-forsaken. *There was no room for Jesus in God-fearing, church-going religious society.* There was no room for Jesus in the inn, no room in Bethlehem and no room in all of Judea.

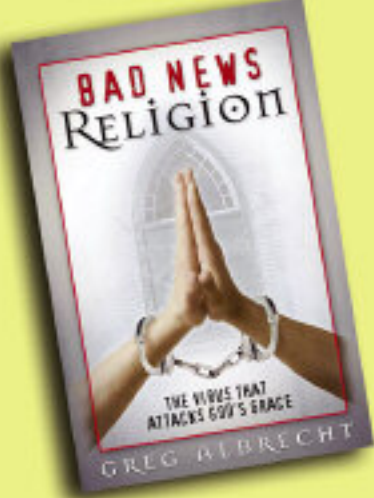
Christmas cards just don’t do justice to this part of the story, do they? Scandal, gossip, a family running for their lives with a newborn out-of-wedlock child, forced to live as aliens in a foreign country—it’s real, it’s part of the way many people are driven to live even today—but it’s not the story that Christmas cards tell.

### Why Did He Come Anyway?

Suppose you were invited to a party, a high school reunion or a wedding. If you knew ahead of time that you would be subjected to a rude reception, why would you even show up? That’s one of the amazing things about Christmas—*God knew exactly how he would be treated, and he came anyway.*

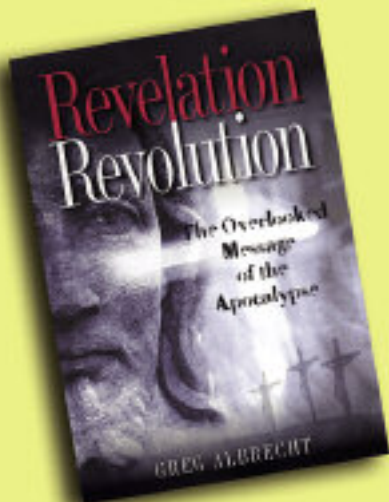
Later in Jesus’ ministry Jewish religious leaders, the Pharisees, challenged Jesus, and their rejection of Jesus went back to that

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## commentary

first Christmas. One of the Pharisees' great claims to fame was their physical and spiritual origins. They took great pride and spiritual satisfaction in their impeccable family tree—father Abraham himself was part of their gene pool. The Pharisees believed their own birth to be religiously pure, and now this illegitimate Jesus was questioning their religion, their traditions and their cherished ways of doing things. They determined to kill him.

Jesus reminded these religious leaders that the true spiritual descendants of Abraham would not be plotting murder. The best the Pharisees could offer in reply was that at least they were not illegitimate children (John 8:41).

The Gospel of John summarizes the rude reception Jesus received; “He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him” (John 1:10-11).

So why did he come anyway? God knows the end from the beginning. He was not only the Creator of the world, but he was and is the author of our story—the God of history. *He came into our world and into our lives fully aware of the rude reception he would receive.*

God knew that humans are unforgiving. God knew that life on earth would not be easy for a child born into a heavily religious society, a child whose illegitimacy would offend established religious values. Why did God choose to be born that way?

### **He Came That We Might Be Reborn**

Birth is a foundational reason Jesus came—not his birth, but ours. *He came so that we could be spiritually reborn, so that we could leave the spiritually polluted barnyards of our lives and be given spotless, unpoluted and unsullied eternal rooms in God's house.*

Jesus came to make room for us, even though he knew he would be

greeted with the “no vacancy” sign at every turn and corner of his physical, earthly life.

The next two verses of the first chapter of John tell us why he came, and why he was born in the unorthodox way he was. As a lyric in *Mary Did You Know* goes, “Did you know this child that you delivered would soon deliver you?”

“Yet to all who received him, to those he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God” (John 1:12-13). This is the greatest love story of all time, there is no greater love, no greater beauty, no greater sacrifice. He “made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant” (Philippians 2:7).

*He came, but he didn't have to.* He came, even though he knew he would receive a rude reception all of his life, culminating with a torturous death on a cross. He accepted the ridicule that the label of illegitimacy would bring. He accepted the fact that his name would become a profane word.

*He came anyway.* He came so that we could have a way out, so that we would be given a new birth, a new name, a new life and that we would have the hope of an eternal future in God's kingdom of heaven. He came to a place of scorn, sin and corruption so that we might rise out of that same swamp of captivity, rising with him from sin and death to eternal life. He came so that we could be reborn.

The Gospel of John summarizes, “The Word became flesh, and made his dwelling among us.... For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (John 1:14,17). Christmas is not only an annual celebration of Jesus' birth, it's an annual reminder of the great unfathomable gift of God's grace to you. Christmas is a reminder of our own spiritual rebirth—an annual, priceless invitation to escape the barnyards of our own lives. Merry Christmas! □

—Greg Abbrecht

**THE PLAIN TRUTH**