



Sightline



The Crucial Truth of Christmas

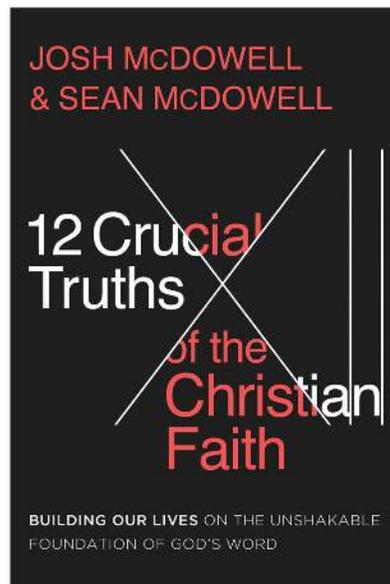
God Became Man

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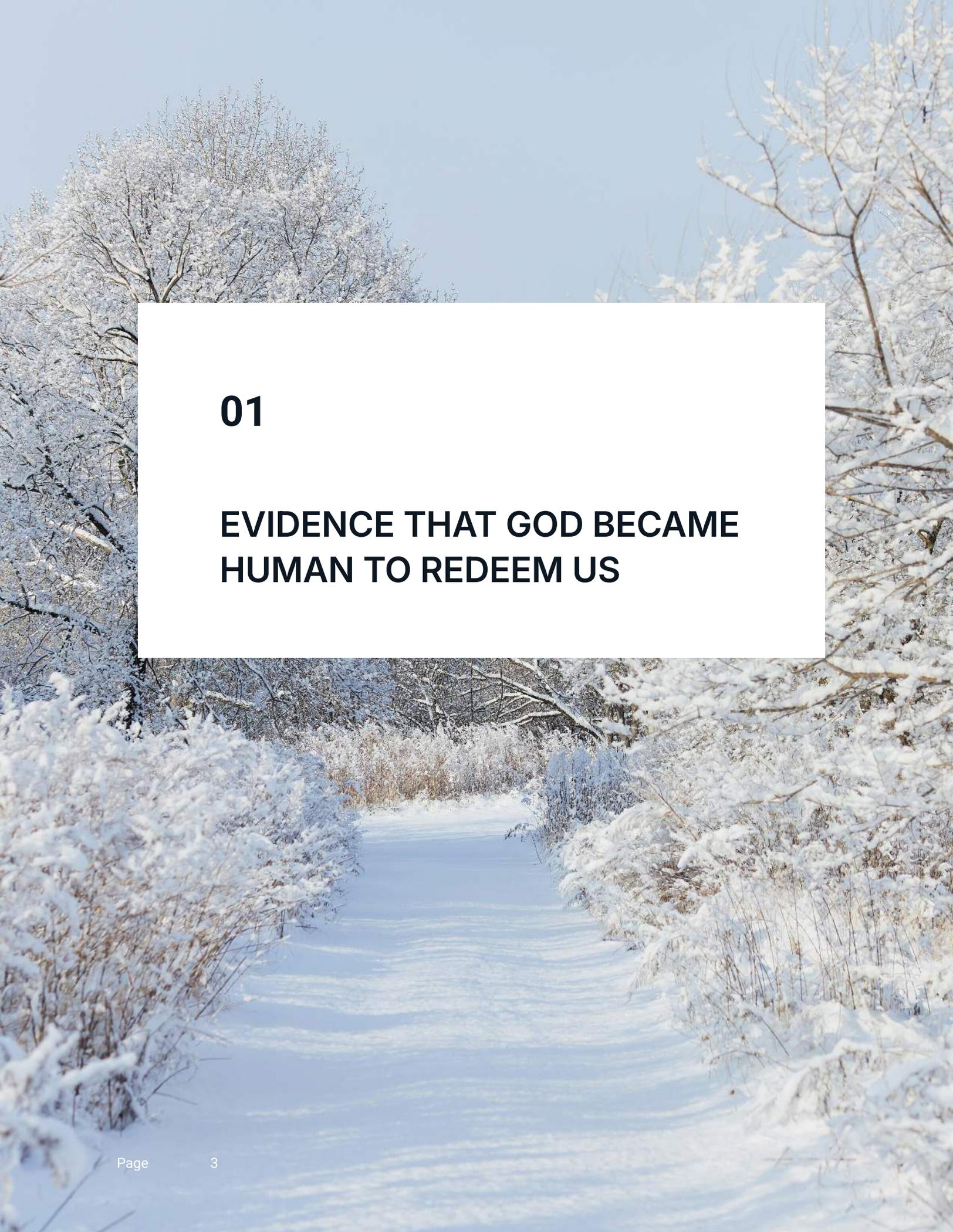
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A serene winter scene featuring a snow-covered path that leads through a forest of trees heavily laden with snow. The sky is a clear, pale blue, and the overall atmosphere is peaceful and quiet. The snow is thick and bright white, contrasting with the dark, snow-laden branches of the trees.

01

**EVIDENCE THAT GOD BECAME
HUMAN TO REDEEM US**

December 25 is a date celebrated by billions of people all over the world each year. We celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ. We proclaim the miraculous incarnation of God taking on human form. We preach about a God full of love and acceptance, who entered our world to save us from eternal death. And though the Scripture says God “became human and lived here on earth among us” (John 1:14), how can we really know if God actually showed up to demonstrate his acceptance and love for us?

That question may sound cynical, but the reality is, God himself wants to assure us that he actually came to earth to redeem us. That is why he had an angel declare to shepherds, “I bring you good news of great joy for everyone! The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born tonight in Bethlehem...!” (Luke 2:10-11). God wanted to assure those living at the time that Mary’s baby was actually the Son of God—the Supreme Being that came to redeem them. God wants us to believe with confidence that his Son is our redeemer as well.

Jesus of Nazareth, born in Bethlehem of Judea some 2000 years ago, is the person of history who claimed to be God’s Son. His claim was exclusive. No other but the Incarnate One could redeem the human race. In fact, he made that truth central to all he said and did. He made believing in him as the Incarnate One the pivotal point. Jesus told his skeptics, “You are of this world; I am not...Unless you believe that I am who I say I am, you will die in your sins” (John 8:23-24).

**"I am the way, the truth, and the life,"
Jesus said. "No one can come to the
Father except through me" (John 14:6).**

02

JESUS WAS BORN OF A VIRGIN

Long before there was the written Word, before anyone had heard of the Messiah, God erected in the Garden of Eden a signpost that pointed directly to the means by which his Son would be born. When God cursed the serpent who tempted Eve, he said to it, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise you on the head, and you shall bruise him on the heel" (Genesis 3:15 NASB). This verse is prophetic, for the offspring of the woman is, of course, Christ.



It is highly significant that Genesis 3:15 refers specifically to the offspring of the woman and not of the man. The natural process of conceiving and giving birth involves the ovum of a woman and the sperm of a man. These are the "seeds" from the two sexes that are necessary for human birth. When God promised the serpent that he would be crushed by the seed of the woman, he referred to a supernatural process: Satan would be defeated by a person conceived from the seed of a woman only, without the usual requirement of the seed of a man.

Scripture foretold that same supernatural process again, 700 years before God was born as a child, when the prophet Isaiah said, “The Lord himself will choose the sign. Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel—‘God is with us’” (Isaiah 7:14). What striking words: “The virgin will conceive.” In the course of nature, virgins don’t conceive. But God promised something human history had never seen before (nor has it since): A child would be born outside the natural process of conception. Instead, the Holy Spirit of God himself would form, in the dark ocean of a virgin’s womb, a child of divine origin.

This person would bear a unique identity because the infinite God would be his father and a finite human virgin would be his mother—thus the God-man would be born. If that really happened—if the historical Jesus truly was born to a virgin—it would provide compelling evidence for his deity. But is there evidence that what had been promised in the Genesis record and Isaiah’s prophecy actually came to pass? Is there any reliable way to investigate the circumstances of Jesus’ birth?

03

THE ACCOUNTS OF THE EVENT



Let's begin with the historical record. Seven centuries after Isaiah's prophecy, Matthew reported the extraordinary circumstances of the birth of a child called Jesus of Nazareth:

This is how Jesus the Messiah was born. His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. But while she was still a virgin, she became pregnant by the Holy Spirit...All of this happened to fulfill the Lord's message through his prophet.

"Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son, and he will be called Immanuel (meaning, God is with us)" (Matthew 1:18, 22-23).



The Gospel of Luke, the careful historian whose writings have been repeatedly supported by archaeology, records the appearance of the angel Gabriel to Mary and his announcement that she would give birth to the Messiah. Mary answered with a question: "But how can I have a baby? I am a virgin." Gabriel replied, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the baby born to you will be holy, and he will be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:34-35).

These two historical accounts give us a record of the event of the virgin birth, but they give us no evidence to assure us the event actually occurred. As we continue to look at the record, however, evidence begins to appear, and this evidence gives us confidence that the overall account is true.

A winter landscape with a snow-covered fence in the foreground and a sunset in the background. The fence is made of wooden posts and rails, heavily laden with snow. The ground is covered in a thick layer of snow. In the background, there are snow-covered trees and a clear sky with a bright sunset on the right side.

04

**REACTIONS OF JESUS'
CONTEMPORARIES**



Among the most significant of these evidences are those contained in the accounts of how the people of Jesus' hometown, Nazareth, reacted to him after he began his public ministry.

On one occasion, after he had taught in the synagogue, the people he had grown up with said, "He's just the carpenter, the son of Mary'...They were deeply offended and refused to believe in him" (Mark 6:3). The label "son of Mary" was an unambiguous insult in a society that called children by the name of their fathers—except, of course, in the case of children whose paternity was doubted.

At another time, Jesus' opponents threw a sharply pointed barb at him when they said, "We were not born out of wedlock!" (John 8:41).

These insults imply it was common knowledge in Jesus' hometown that he had been conceived before Mary's wedding to—and without the help of—Joseph. In other words, it seems very likely the circumstances of Jesus' miraculous birth caused him to be labeled as an illegitimate child in the society of his day.

These insults hurled at Jesus give us evidence that his hometown people knew he was not Joseph's son. This gives us a leg up in believing in the virgin birth, but it is not a clincher. How do we judge whether the birth was indeed miraculous or whether Mary was lying and Joseph was deceived? For answers let's look first at Mary's story and then at Matthew's account of Jesus' birth.





05

**THE RESPONSES OF MARY AND
JOSEPH**

When Mary turned up pregnant, why would she have insisted that she was a virgin? She knew such a story would certainly be too wild to believe; why didn't she come up with a more believable story? She could have claimed she was raped, or she could have claimed Joseph pressured her into yielding to his desire. Joseph would have known better, but no one else would have. But instead of a rational explanation that would fit the known laws of nature, she tells people she is pregnant by God's Holy Spirit. Why would she say such a thing when it is so certain to be the least believable of explanations? Only one reason makes sense. It was true.

Now let's look at her pregnancy from her fiancé Joseph's point of view. Here is what Matthew tells us about Joseph's reaction:



This is how Jesus the Messiah was born. His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. But before the marriage took place, while she was still a virgin, she became pregnant through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Joseph, her fiancé, was a good man and did not want to disgrace her publicly, so he decided to break the engagement quietly. As he considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. "Joseph, son of David," the angel said, "do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. For the child within her was conceived by the Holy Spirit"...When Joseph woke up, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded and took Mary as his wife (Matthew 1:18-20, 24).

As you can see, Joseph knew all about the birds and the bees. He knew how babies were made, and he had not had sex with his fiancée. So when Mary turned up pregnant, he was naturally convinced she had committed fornication. So he resolved to do what any man would—call off the engagement. Matthew's account, however, tells us that an angel told Joseph the truth about Mary's pregnancy. And based on that communication, he believed and went on with the wedding.

Think about what this tells us. Joseph would have been the hardest man on the planet to convince of Mary's story that she was a virgin. He was directly affected! He was the man who would, for the rest of his life, be ridiculed for marrying an unfaithful, pregnant woman who was bearing another man's child. He would have to endure the contempt of the men in the town, who would forever look on him as too stupid not to believe Mary's wild story.

Yet it's clear Joseph was not stupid and made his decision fully aware of the implications of violating social expectations about purity and the sanctity of marriage. A good and prudent man, as Matthew calls him, would be well aware of how marrying Mary would mar his reputation for the rest of his life. So why would he go on and marry the girl? Only one reason makes any sense at all. He actually received a message from an angel, and that message was the absolute truth: Mary was a virgin who was bearing in her womb the Son of God. The fact that Joseph believed this truth, knew the lifelong consequences, and yet took under his protective wing the Son of God and his earthly mother is what makes this man one of the great heroes of the Bible.

The evidence for the virgin birth not only points to the conclusion that Jesus of Nazareth is who he claimed to be; it also shows how much he identified with us. Though he was God, he humbled himself and willingly endured the sneers and scorn of those who didn't believe in him.



06

**WHAT GOD'S UNCONDITIONAL
ACCEPTANCE PRODUCES**

The Crucial Truth of Christmas: God Became Man



God coming to earth isn't based on anything you have done or could do in the future. It is purely the result of his grace. Every other religion in the world teaches that human effort is required to attain some type of "salvation." But what some religions call salvation is essentially escape from evil with no prospect of joy. Buddhists explain that a person must go through countless cycles of reincarnation to reach what is called nirvana, which is essentially a state of personal oblivion. Islam teaches Muslims they must work very hard to qualify for rewards that Allah may choose to give them. Mormons declare grace is obtained only after a person does all he or she can do to receive salvation. But Christianity teaches that humans are helpless and can do nothing to merit salvation. It is God who takes the initiative to reach out to his enemies. "God saved you by his special favor when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

We state it again for emphasis: His grace was extended to us while we were gripped by death—sinners by birth and enemies of God. “When we were utterly helpless, Christ came at just the right time...God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners” (Romans 5:6, 8). “Can we boast, then, that we have done anything to be accepted by God? No, because our acquittal is not based on our good deeds” (Romans 3:27). Regardless of all you’ve done—or haven’t done—he offers grace. God accepts you completely without any conditions, and in spite of your sin he provides a way back to him.

The relational meaning of the incarnation is that you and I are unconditionally loved and accepted. There is perhaps nothing that brings greater joy to the human heart than for another person to know all your faults and failures and, despite them, love you for being you.



07

**CELEBRATING THE INCARNATION
AT CHRISTMAS**

The Crucial Truth of Christmas: God Became Man

The Christmas season provides rich opportunities to focus on the awesome truth of the incarnation—“God wants to have a relationship with you!” Here are some practical ways to accomplish that goal.

While trimming the tree. Some people say that the Christmas tree tradition began when Martin Luther, struck by the beauty of a forest of starlit fir trees, brought one indoors and decorated it with candles to remind his children of God’s creation. When you and your family are trimming your Christmas tree, you can have this conversation:

Ask, “What can the lights on the tree tell us about the meaning of Christmas?” After fielding questions, turn off the Christmas lights on the tree and say, “This is what all of us are like without Jesus—empty bulbs without light or life.” Turn on the lights and say, “This is what all of us are like when we connect to God. He gives life and light to all who believe in Christ as their Savior. When you see the Christmas tree lit up, think of the true meaning of Christmas—that God sent his Son to earth because he wants so very much to have a relationship with you.”

Ask, “What can the evergreen tree tell us about the meaning of Christmas?” After the answers and discussion, say, “You know the leaves of other trees turn brown and die in the fall. But the evergreen tree never turns brown. Its leaves remain green year-round. Before Christ was in our lives, we were like other trees. We could never live forever. But because of Christ we have the promise of eternal life. When you see the evergreen tree, remember Christ came so you can remain alive forever if you have a relationship with him.”

On singing or listening to Christmas music. Christmas music is an excellent tool to reinforce the meaning of the incarnation. When the word Immanuel is used in a song, ask what the word means. Explain that Christ was called Immanuel, meaning "God is with us," because Jesus is God who came to live with us. And why did Jesus come to earth? He came to offer himself as a sacrifice so we could have a relationship with God.

When hearing "Silent Night," ask, "What does it mean that Jesus was a 'holy infant so tender and mild'?" This phrase gives you the opportunity to point out that Jesus was the "holy infant" because his birth father was not Joseph but rather the Holy God of the universe. Thus, Jesus was born of a virgin with God as his birth father.

When hearing "Angels We Have Heard on High," ask, "Why did the angels sing 'Gloria in excelsis deo'?" Explain that the phrase means "Glory to God in the highest." The angels sang it because it was a most glorious day when God became a human being as part of his wonderful plan to restore us to a relationship with him.

When "decking the halls." Young people generally love Christmas and all the decoration that accompanies the season. They may not, however, give much thought to the deeper reasons for decorating. Use the time of decorating your home or church to emphasize the purpose: "We decorate to express how very thankful we are that God did what he did in sending Christ to earth so we can enjoy a relationship with God."

Write a Christmas card to Jesus. Christmas cards are used primarily to express holiday wishes and sentiments to one another. But you can also use cards to teach young people the relational meaning of Christmas. Ask them to write a card to Jesus, expressing their thankfulness for his becoming human and for what he says to them through the incarnation.

Suggestion: "First, tell Jesus that you know he sees and knows everything you do and think (good or bad), yet he accepts you just the way you are. And then tell Jesus how that makes you feel. Thank him for accepting you without any conditions."

"For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."

-Luke 2:11



The Crucial Truth...

In "The Crucial Truth of Christmas: God Became Man," Josh and Sean McDowell explore the profound significance of the incarnation, revealing how God's extraordinary choice to become human offers a path to redemption and unconditional love. Through compelling evidence and historical context, the authors challenge readers to embrace the true meaning of Christmas—a celebration of God's desire for a personal relationship with each of us. This thought-provoking work invites you to reflect on the miracle of Christ's birth and its transformative power in our lives.

