

The Birth of Jesus Christ, the Savior

Luke 2:1-20

Luke 2:1-20: And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2 This census first took place while Quirinius was governing Syria. 3 So all went to be registered, everyone to his own city. 4 Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, 5 to be registered with Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with child. 6 So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered. 7 And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. 8 Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid. 10 Then the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. 11 For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. 12 And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger." 13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: 14 "Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!" 15 So it was, when the angels had gone away from them into heaven, that the shepherds said to one another, "Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us." 16 And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger. 17 Now when they had seen Him, they made widely known the saying which was told them concerning this Child. 18 And all those who heard it marveled at those things which were told them by the shepherds. 19 But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart. 20 Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told them.

Background Notes

When we hear this familiar passage read we tend to visualize Christmas pageants and Nativity scenes, because we hear this account read every Christmas time. Well, it certainly is the "Christmas story," but there are lessons here for every day of the year.

As far as the background goes: tradition says that the Lord was born in a cave. The Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem is built over the (supposed) exact site and cave where the Lord was born and laid in a manger, but we can't be sure if this is the exact location or not. There are a number of caves in that area, but we don't know whether or not the Lord was actually born in a cave. We do know that caves were used as stables for animals in ancient days. The manger then would most likely be a stone feeding trough, not the wooden "orange-crate" type of manger that is often used in Sunday school Christmas programs!

As to the Inn (v7): this was probably a room in a private house rather than a public hotel, as we think of today. The same Greek word (*kataluma*), that is used here for “Inn,” is also used in Mark 14:14 for the large upper guest room where the Last Supper was held. Since there was no room in the *kataluma*, or guest room, the birthplace of the Lord could have been in the lower part of the house where they kept the animals, or it could have been in a cave associated with the house complex and used as a stable. However, we **do** know for sure that the Lord’s birth took place in the town of Bethlehem.

Verse 7 says that Mary gave birth to her **firstborn** son. The use of the word **firstborn** indicates that Mary and Joseph later had other children. Jesus, Mary’s firstborn child, was of course born when Mary was still a virgin.

Doctrinal points

1. World rulers are mere instruments in the hand of God.

Emperor Caesar Augustus ruled the Roman world for about forty years, from 27 BC to 14 AD. Under his imperial rule, it was decreed that a census should be taken at this time throughout the Roman Empire, for military and taxation purposes. Jews were exempt from military service -- but they were not exempt from taxes! At this time the Roman province of Syria included all of Israel, and Quirinius was governor of Syria at the time of the census. Luke has been shown to be historically correct in his dating.

According to the Roman regulations for the census, all residents were to register in the hometown of their forefathers. Because Joseph was of the house of David, he had to go to Bethlehem, the city of David. Mary was also of the house of David. So Mary and Joseph traveled over rough roads from Nazareth to Bethlehem, a good 75 miles, a journey that would have taken them at least 3 days.

This empire-wide census happened so that Mary would be in Bethlehem in time to give birth to Jesus, because the prophecy of Micah 5:2 said that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. Little did Caesar Augustus know that his decree of a census for the purposes of taxation was all part of God’s sovereign plan to get Mary to Bethlehem at just the right time! Undoubtedly Mary and Joseph would have known of this prophecy, but I wonder -- did Mary and Joseph realize that they were fulfilling prophecy as they traveled to Bethlehem?

World rulers are mere instruments in the hand of God! God can use anyone, including world rulers and political leaders, to accomplish His sovereign purposes. Proverbs 21:1 says, *“The king’s heart is in the hand of the Lord; like the rivers of water, He turns it wherever he wishes”* So whether it be Caesar Augustus issuing a decree that would force Mary to travel to Bethlehem in the 1st century, or whether it be international leaders of the last century paving the way for the return of the nation of Israel in 1948, or whether it be the decisions of kings or presidents today that allow open doors for the Gospel – remember -- world rulers are mere instruments in the hand of God!

2. Country shepherds are not insignificant to the heart of God.

In that day, shepherds were common, ordinary, simple folk. Many people despised them because of their insignificant occupation, and because shepherds were religiously unclean much of the time. But God did not choose the Pharisees or the Sadducees or the political rulers in Israel to be the first to hear about the Messiah's birth -- He chose **shepherds!** We certainly have a spiritual lesson here. Simple, ordinary, common people are every bit as important to the heart of God as any elite group!

Notice the three titles of the Lord in the angel's announcement (v11): *"Today in the city of David a Savior has been born to you; He is Christ the Lord."*

Savior: Jesus is the only One who can save us from our sins.

Christ: Jesus is the Messiah, the Anointed One.

Lord: Jesus is **God**.

In verse 14 we have the "Gloria in Excelsis Deo," the Latin term for "Glory to God in the Highest." The phrase "peace, goodwill to men" can also be translated, "peace to men with whom He is pleased," or "peace to men on whom His favor rests." In other words, the peace of God is not assured to every person, but only to those with whom God is pleased, namely upon believers.

At that time, the Roman world was experiencing what was known as the "Pax Romana" -- the "Peace of Rome." The "peace of Rome" was established and enforced by the brutality and might of the armies of the Roman Empire. What a contrast to the peace of Christ, that brings salvation from sin and joy to the soul forever more. The peace that Jesus Christ brings is the peace that was announced to the shepherds -- and it is still being announced to ordinary people around the world today! Country shepherds are not insignificant to the heart of God.

Practical Application

1. Let's learn the lesson of the swaddling clothes!

Look at the sign the angel gave to the shepherds -- the sign that they had found the Messiah. Verse 12: *"And this will be the sign to you. You will find a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger."* A baby, wrapped in swaddling clothes -- just strips of cloth that were wrapped around babies in Bible times.

Notice that the sign was not a halo or some obvious glow emanating from the baby. No! The sign was that the Messiah, the Lord of Glory, would be a baby, wrapped in common ordinary strips of cloth, lying in a feeding trough!

This is the same sign that the Lord gives to people today who are open to finding the Lord, just as the shepherds were. Simple Christians today are like the swaddling clothes. We don't have halos. Our bodies do not radiate a glow. We're just ordinary people -- but **we have the light and life of Christ within us!** 2 Corinthians 4:7 says, "...but we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence may be the power of God, and not of us." We are just common, ordinary, unsophisticated clay pots -- but we are born again and **we have the life of Christ within us!** The life of Jesus Christ within us is God's sign to those who are seeking Him. Can seekers see the life of Christ in us? Let's learn the lesson of the swaddling clothes!

2. Don't limit God by your expectations.

Look again at what the angels said to the shepherds in verse 12: *"and this will be the sign to you. You will find a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger."* No one in Israel expected the Messiah to come this way -- not as a poor, helpless baby born to a poor, insignificant couple -- a baby who would be wrapped in strips of cloth and placed in a feeding trough for animals!

Now those in Israel who had insight into the Scriptures knew that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2). Furthermore, the Messianic prophecies of the Old Testament Scriptures made it clear that the Messiah would be born as a baby. Concerning the Messiah, Isaiah predicted his birth as a baby in Isaiah 9: *"for unto us a child is born"* -- and in Isaiah 53:2 his childhood was predicted: *"for He shall grow up before him as a tender plant, and as a root out of dry ground."* So the prophecies foretold the humble and lowly beginnings of the Messiah.

However, certainly no one expected a helpless baby lying in a manger! But when the shepherds were informed of the Messiah's birth and the humble sign, **they believed!** They did not limit God by their former expectations.

Neither did Mary and Joseph. They did not limit God, no matter what they may have expected when the angelic messages were given to them months before in Nazareth. The angels said nothing about the conditions that would surround the coming birth of the Messiah, but I don't think Mary and Joseph expected that the Messiah would be born in a place where animals were kept, or that they would have to use a feeding trough for a cradle for the baby, and that they themselves would have to sleep on the ground! But they did not limit God by their expectations.

What about us? Do we limit God by the way we expect our prayers to be answered? Do we limit God by the way we expect His plans to be worked out in our lives? Or by the way we expect people to treat us? Or by the way we expect people to respond to our ministry? We may be in for some big surprises! Don't limit God by your expectations!