

The Birth Of Christ

Luke 2:1-20

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This is one of the most well-known stories in the Bible. If you asked people, “What story in the Bible do you know?” they would probably tell you the story of Jesus being born in a manger, in a humble birth in Bethlehem, angels, shepherds and all that stuff. They’ll throw the wise men in but won’t know how to put this all together. But this is a story that is probably the best known and best loved story in all the Bible, the Word of God.

One of the reasons I like it is because it is one of the night scenes of the Bible. I preach a series on the night scenes of the Bible. This is one of them. This was the night of nights. It was the night that would dispel darkness. There would be no more darkness. This was the night when “the light of the world” would be born in the world to dispel all darkness.

In the story in Luke 2:1-20, there are three miracles I want you to see. The first is the miracle of the Incarnation. The word “incarnate” is a Latin word which means “become flesh.” God, in the Person of Christ, came down to earth and took on real and full humanity, while still maintaining His deity. Christmas is all about the Incarnation through the virgin womb of Mary.

Beginning in verse 1, it says, “And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus.” He was first known as Octavius and was the grand-nephew of Julius Caesar. He was the first Caesar to take the title Augustus, which means “of the gods.” He was the first Caesar to be worshipped as a god or declared lord. And Caesar Augustus said, “that all the world...”—which was the Roman world or the Roman Empire—“...should be registered” or “taxed.” “This census first took place while Quirinius was governing Syria. So all went to be registered, everyone to his own city.” So they had to go back to the city of their ancestral birth, where their roots were, to be enrolled for the purpose of taxation.

Verse 4, “Joseph also went up from Galilee...”—which was in the north—“...out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea...”—which was in the south—“...to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem...”—which means “house of bread”—“...because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with child. So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered. 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.”

This first thing that strikes me is that Luke, the historian, gives the time of the Savior’s Incarnation, Advent or His birth. It was “while Quirinius was governing Syria” and when Caesar Augustus said “that all the world should be registered.” It was “in those days.” What day was it? It was the day that God the Father had predetermined, before the foundation of the world. Even before Adam and Eve were created in the Garden of Eden, God knew there would be the Fall, God knew He would send His Son, Jesus, to redeem man back to God and He knew the exact moment of the exact day it would take place.

I believe that the Bible teaches that God is sovereign, that history is God's story, that He is in control. And did you know that God isn't in a hurry? I'm in a hurry. Are you in a hurry? I stopped at In-N-Out the other night to get something to eat. I was late to get to see The Nutcracker Suite in Orange County. My granddaughter was dancing in it. I was driving, it was raining, I was late and I had to get something to eat before the performance. I ran into In-N-Out, and I waited and I waited. I almost lost my sanctification. At Christmas, no doubt! I was in such a hurry to get into the parking lot. I tried to get into a small spot and scraped the car next to me, knocked the people in the car, so I had to give them my license and insurance information. Pray for me; I might go to jail. But I got so impatient, because the food wasn't arriving on time.

Yet in life we know that God is always right on time. He's never too late, and He's never too early. This is what Paul calls it in Galatians 4:4-5: "But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman..."—there's His humanity—"...born under the law..." So God sending "forth His Son" is Jesus' deity, and being "born of a woman" is His humanity. "...to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons." So Jesus came at the exact, perfect time of God's appointed coming.

Quirinius, governor of Syria, and Caesar Augustus in Rome thought they were running things. They thought they were sitting on top of the world. But the truth is that they were only puppets in the hand of a sovereign God. The Bible says in Micah 5:2 that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. Mary and Joseph lived about 80 miles north of Bethlehem in Nazareth. And in order to fulfill prophecy in time and history, God turned the heart of Caesar Augustus and made him give a decree. This decree was that everyone needed to enroll in the home of their ancestral birth for the sake of a census to enable them to be taxed. So Caesar is sitting in Rome thinking that he is running the world, gives his edict, but little does he realize he is a puppet in the hand of God. God is turning the heart of the emperor in whatever way He desires.

This was because God wanted to get Joseph and Mary, in her last stages of pregnancy, from Nazareth down to Bethlehem. The name Bethlehem means "house of bread." How fitting that "the bread of life" from heaven was born in Bethlehem. But no man in his right mind would take his nine-month pregnant wife, put her on a donkey—it doesn't say donkey in the text; I'm just using some imagination—and take her on an 80-mile ride to Bethlehem. It would take three-to-four days to get there. But God is actually sovereignly moving Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem. God is in control. Remember that when you're upset with the world around you.

Verse 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." Why does Luke mention that? Because God gave to David a promise. It's called the Davidic Covenant; that through his lineage or seed, the Messiah would come. So David had the privilege and blessing of being the great-great-great-grandfather of the Messiah, who would come to be the Savior of the world.

Verse 5, "...to be registered with Mary, his betrothed..."—or "espoused" in the King James

translation—“...wife, who was with child.” What does that mean? “Espoused” means they had entered into that last, one-year, legally binding relationship where they could legally be called husband and wife, though they did not consummate their marriage yet. This is why in Matthew 1, Matthew called Mary the wife of Joseph. People freak out about that. But they had been legally bound and had not yet consummated their marriage relationship.

Marriage was by arrangement in those days. Parents would set up the engagement period, then the last year before they got married, they would enter the espousal period, which was legally binding and could only be broken by divorce. Then they would be considered husband and wife, but they didn't yet live together as husband and wife.

Now in verses 6-7 we see the actual birth of Christ. “So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn Son...” This wasn't her only son, just her first one, but she is still a virgin at this time. “...and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths...” Dr. Luke used medical terms for “swaddling cloths” that Jesus was wrapped in. “...and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.” A manger was actually a feeding trough for animals. It wasn't the building they were in. Some feel they were in a grotto cave. Joseph probably cleaned the trough out and put some fresh hay in it. What a picture of humble birth!

And don't get upset with the innkeeper. A lot of preachers bash the poor innkeeper. He's going to have a lot to say to some preachers when they get to heaven. There is no indication that he was a bad person. The inn was full! What was he supposed to do?! Some commentator said that he should have given up his own lodging. How can you say that? God was providing a quiet place, a humble place for them.

Any time I preach on this story, I am overwhelmed with the beauty and splendor. And at the top of my list is the humility of His birth. When God sent His Son into the world, He passed over Rome, Athens, Jerusalem and the Temple in Jerusalem. Rather He goes to Bethlehem in a humble, little place and picked Mary and Joseph, two humble peasants, and probably illiterate. And Joseph was a carpenter with calloused hands. Sometimes we forget about what a wonderful man Joseph must have been, for God to call him as well. Joseph would be the adopted father of Jesus. He would train Jesus as He grew up. What a blessing that is. I'm struck by the beauty of the humility of His birth. How humble was the birth of the Son of God; born to humble parents in a humble setting.

Philippians 2:5-11 says, “Christ Jesus, who, being in the form...”—or “morphe,” which means “essence”—“...of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God...”—or “equal in essence”—“...but made Himself of no reputation, taking on the form...”—or “morphe, essence”—“...of a bondservant...”—this is the Incarnation—“...and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.” The Cross, the Crucifixion was one of the purposes of the Incarnation. “Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow...and that

every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

That is a beautiful description. Theologians call it “the kenosis” or “emptying passage.” It shows us how Jesus laid aside His majesty, His glory and His splendor and took on humanity.

When we speak of the Incarnation, I want to make it clear that it means God was born a baby and that God took on real humanity. He took on full humanity, without being sinful. That’s why he was born of a virgin. That’s what was conceived in Mary’s womb was the work of the Holy Spirit. He was the holy child Jesus. So Jesus is unique in that He is fully God and fully man or it is better said that He was truly God and truly man at the same time. He is one Person, Jesus Christ, with two natures, human and divine. That way He could lay His hand on mankind and lay His other hand on God the Father; He could be the perfect bridge-builder, the High Priest, to save us from our sin and be our Redeemer.

In 1 Timothy 3:16, Paul says, “Great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifested in the flesh.” In 2 Corinthians 8:9, Paul also says, “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich.” So this again is a description of Jesus in heaven coming down to earth and taking on real humanity, in order that He might die for the sins of the world.

In Hebrews 4:15, the writer of Hebrews says, “For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin.” There are five ways that Jesus, as Emmanuel, which means “God with us,” is with us. One of those ways, in the Person of Christ, is that He became a man so He could empathize, sympathize with us. When you’re hungry, He understands. When you’re thirsty, He understands. Jesus said, “I thirst!” John 19:28. When you shed a tear, He understands. The Bible says, “Jesus wept,” John 11:35, when He lost His good friend, Lazarus. Jesus became weary and tired. All the feelings and emotions of our humanity God is able to sympathize and harmonize with us as human beings. What a marvelous truth that is! So God becoming a man in the Person of Jesus Christ is the Incarnation, so He could sympathize with us.

The second miracle is in verses 8-14, the miracle of the angelic visitation. “Now there were in the same country...” This was in the area of Bethlehem, which is west bank. “...shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.” So this is the night scene. “And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid” or “freaking out.” “Then the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings...’—or “good news”; not good views—“...of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born...”—that’s His humanity—“...to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” This is His deity. “And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger.’ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: ‘Glory to God in the highest...’—that’s the highest realm—“... and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!”

Someone said—and I like it—that this was the first Christmas and the first Christmas service.

The congregants were the shepherds. The preacher was the angel, and his message was in verses 10-11.

The congregation consisted of “shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.” So Jesus’ humble birth was announced to humble shepherds. On the social ladder, you couldn’t get lower than a shepherd, because they couldn’t do the ceremonial washings, couldn’t be in the Temple to worship God as they were considered ceremonially unclean and they couldn’t testify in a courtroom. They were despised and looked down upon. But God went to the humble shepherds to notify them of Jesus’ birth. They might have been the only ones up that late at night.

When the angel spoke to the shepherds, he said, “Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people.” I don’t know if this angel was Gabriel, but all through the Christmas story we have Gabriel appearing to Zacharias, to Mary, to Joseph, in Matthew 1. And Gabriel may have appeared to Mary and Joseph to tell them to flee to Egypt for Jesus’ protection. So angels were all involved at this time in the life of the baby Jesus.

I like this message, the first Christmas message ever preached. Being a preacher myself, I like to note the content of the message. The angel said to the shepherds, “Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” So Christmas dispels our fear, Christmas is good news, the proclamation about Jesus is centered in a person, Christmas brings “great joy” and is for “all people.”

Let me break it down further. Who came? “Christ the Lord.” “Christ” is not His last name. “Christ” is a title. It’s the word “Messiah.” It’s the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew Old Testament “Mashiach,” which means “Messiah” or “the Anointed One.” So Jesus is the Messiah of the nation of Israel and the Savior of the world.

And the word “Lord” is the Greek word “Kurios,” which interestingly the Septuagint, the Hebrew Old Testament, translated it into Greek, in the inter-testament period, as “Yahweh” or “Jehovah.” Whenever you have “Lord,” in all capital letters in the Old Testament, it’s “Jehovah” or “Yahweh,” and in the Septuagint, it’s translated “Kurios,” which is actually used in the New Testament as well to refer to Jesus Christ. So it is consistent with the fact that Jesus Christ is Lord.

We also have the name “Jesus,” which means “God saves,” and is equivalent to “Joshua.” So He is the God who saves, He is the Lord or Kurios and He is the Mashiach or the Anointed One. So all this is the content in the angelic message he is delivering to the shepherds.

How did He come? “There is born to you,” verse 11. That phrase indicates His humanity. And we know from earlier in the book of Luke that Mary was a virgin, the Holy Spirit came upon her and that which was conceived in her was the work of the Holy Spirit.

Where was He born? In “the City of David,” Bethlehem. This was fulfilling Micah’s prophecy

500 years before He was born and fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy 700 years before He was born, that He would be the Son of David.

Jesus was also born "a Savior," verse 11. This is my favorite point that the angel makes in his message to the shepherds. "For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." Not a philosopher, not a psychologist, not a politician. The world is lost in sin. We are under death and condemnation living in darkness. And God sent His Son to save us from sin as the Savior of the world.

And there is only one person who can save you from sin. That's Jesus Christ. The Bible says, "There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved," Acts 4:12. Jesus is the only Savior, Redeemer, Messiah, Lord of the world. He is the only God-man, born of a virgin, lived a sinless life, died on the Cross a substitutionary death, by which we must be saved. All through the New Testament the Bible makes it clear that He came to save us from our sins.

And who did He come to save? "All people," verse 10. This is consistent with Luke's universal Gospel—"all people." Luke doesn't say it's just for the Jewish people or just for the Gentile people, but it's for "all people."

What can Jesus Christ bring? He takes away our fears and brings us "great joy," verse 10; and He brings us peace, verse 14. "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace." What a contrast, by the way, of in heaven, the highest realm, "and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!" or "on earth peace among men with whom He is well pleased," in the Amplified Bible.

This very area in which the story took place is in a war right now. Isn't it ironic that when you watch the news and see the missiles and bombs going off with all the death and misery, that this is where Jesus came to bring peace? The only hope for peace is when Christ reigns in our hearts when we surrender to Him, and we have peace with God. Peace on earth starts with peace with God. We're at war with God, we're at enmity with God without Jesus Christ. You can't have peace in your heart until you have peace with God. Then you can have the peace of God and peace with people on earth. So the peace comes from knowing Christ. What a marvelous truth that is.

The third miracle we find is in verses 15-17. It's the miracle of the shepherd's proclamation. "So it was, when the angels had gone away..." Jesus is Emmanuel; He came to stay with us. "...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.' And they came with haste and found..."—which indicates they had to search—"...Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger." The word "haste" means "to cut a straight path." That indicates the shepherds didn't take the main roads; they just cut their own trail right through the hills. They wanted to see the babe lying in the manger as quickly as possible. "Now when they had seen Him, they made widely known..."—they "proclaimed" or "preached"—"...the saying which was told them concerning this Child."

So the first evangelists of the first coming of Christ as a baby born in the manger were the humble, lowly shepherds. Paul said that “God has chosen the foolish things...the weak things...the base things...and the things which are despised...to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence,” 1 Corinthians 1:27-29. God uses the humble and the lowly who surrender and yield to Him. So the first evangelists were the humble, lowly shepherds and not the elite aristocrats of the day.

And what I want to point out are the shepherds’ prompt obedience. They didn’t say, “You know it’s the middle of the night! Don’t you realize you woke us up?! We had finally gotten to sleep, and the sheep were quiet. We’ll go in the morning when the sun comes up.” No; they said, “Let us now go to Bethlehem.” So they immediately, promptly obeyed.

God always rewards obedience. The Bible says, “Be doers of the word, and not hearers only,” James 1:22. So the shepherds heard the message and they promptly obeyed. We should follow the shepherds’ example. And at Christmas we should proclaim to others the Savior’s birth. Christmas is a great time to evangelize. Tell others the meaning of Christmas, the significance of Christmas, about the birth of Christ and why He came. So they obeyed in faith, promptly, and so should we.

Now I want you to notice the response to the Christmas miracle, verses 18-20. “And all those who heard it...”—that is, the message the shepherds proclaimed—“...marveled at those things which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart.” I like that. “Then the shepherds returned.” That’s interesting. They had just seen the sky light up with angels, they had just seen the Savior of the world. Some believe that the shepherds were watching the Temple sheep used for sacrifice, so how significant that they would be the first to see Jesus, the Lamb of God, who would carry away the sins of the world. Then they go back to watching sheep. So we go back to our place of employment, to our own community, to our family and tell them the good news. Then the shepherds returned “glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told them.”

I’ve always felt that this is one of the clearest passages in the Bible in the birth of Christ narrative that teaches us how to celebrate Christmas. So there are three ways to celebrate Christmas. Number one, wonder at the event itself, verse 18. It means to be amazed and be in awe. I never get tired of hearing the Christmas story. It’s always wonderful and new.

We should wonder at the event itself. It’s a wonder that God would send Gabriel to Zacharias and to Elizabeth and to Mary and Joseph. It’s a wonder that the angels would come to the shepherds and fill the sky with “Glory to God in the highest!” It’s a wonder that Jesus would be born in humility, in poverty, as a baby dependent on His parents. “God contracted to a span, incomprehensibly made man.” In my study this week, I came across the statement that said, “God became a baby.” What an amazing thing; that God became a baby! You just have to wonder at the glory and majesty of the Incarnation.

When I was a little boy growing up in San Bernardino, we could never afford to go to

Disneyland. I'm still tweaked by that. All my friends had gone to Disneyland and said, "Oh, it's so cool!" I didn't get to go. I just got to hear the stories. I didn't get to go to Disneyland until my late teens. And since I was so old, I didn't think it really was that great, especially when I paid to get in! I could see the phony wires and the speakers and knew it wasn't real. So I lost the awe and wonder of it.

Then we took our children to Disneyland when they were young, and they were awestruck. But one of my three daughters, Amy, freaked out when the characters came walking down Main Street. I thought, I paid good money to scare my little girl to death?! This is not good.

The awe and wonder that kids have when they go to Disneyland is the awe and wonder that we, as adults, I pray we never outgrow when it comes to Christmas, the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Number two, we should ponder the meaning of Christmas. The word "pondered," in verse 19, is a uniquely different word from "wonder" or "marveled," in verse 18. "Ponder" means "to think down upon." It literally has the idea of using your mind "to think down upon." So wonder with your heart and ponder with your mind. I really encourage you to do that.

I try, as the years go by as a preacher at Christmas, to preach more doctrinal, theological, deep Biblical sermons about the meaning of Christmas. Today not only are we Biblically illiterate, but we're shallow. We get real sentimental at Christmas, but we don't think theologically and doctrinally at Christmas.

Rather think deeply about the Second Person of the Trinity. He came to earth voluntarily. Think deeply about the Incarnation; that Jesus took on humanity while still remaining fully God. Think about the fact that in the birth of Jesus Christ, humanity and deity were fused together in one Person for all eternity. Think deeply about His sinless life, about His miracles, about the Cross. Think deeply about the substitutionary facet of the Cross; that He died in your place by taking your sin. God's Christmas tree was the Cross of Christ. Think about the Resurrection. Think about the Ascension. Think about the exaltation. All of this was wrapped up in a baby born in Bethlehem. So ponder its meaning.

Someone said, "Mary started her baby book." When a mom has a baby, they start a baby book. Maybe today it's all done digitally. But they used to get a book and put all the photos in there. I noticed that when the first baby is born, you have about seven books full of pictures. "My baby rolled over today," with eight pictures. When the second baby is born, it goes down to four or five books. When the third baby is born, there are two books. And when the fourth baby is born, there is one book with one picture. And all it says is, "I'm tired." So Mary brought together her baby book with the pictures. She was thinking of all the stories she had heard.

Number three, we should celebrate Christmas by praising God, verse 20: "glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told them."

So we should wonder with our heart, ponder with our mind and glorify God with our heart and

emotions by our lips. Glorify God means to worship God.

Jesus Christ came to save us from our sins. The number one reason for the Incarnation was so He could be crucified. The cradle lead to the Cross. The Cross lead to the crown. And Jesus Christ is coming back again.