

The Birth of Jesus

2 In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ² This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³ All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴ Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵ He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶ While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷ And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

The Shepherds and the Angels

⁸ In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹ to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and 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 heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” ¹⁶ So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. ¹

“WE just heard read one of the most familiar stories in the Greek Bible, Luke’s story of the birth of Jesus. It is the reason that we celebrate Christmas and the cause of us being in this place at this time. So let’s examine the story again on this Christmas Sunday and see what it may teach us and remind us that Jesus was not just a baby but was also the center of power as far as heaven was concerned.

Luke tells us that at the time of Jesus’ birth Augustus Caesar was ruling the Roman world, but God was in charge, because God used Caesar’s decree to move Mary and Joseph eighty miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem to fulfill God’s Word. Rome took a census every fourteen years for both military and tax purposes, and each Jewish male had to return to the city of his fathers to record his name, occupation, property, and

¹ *The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. Nashville : Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989, S. Lk 2:1-20

family. Some have argued that it seems strange that people were not registered in the places where they currently lived, but I. Howard Marshall in his book *The Gospel of Luke* reports that there are other instances of this same practice.

God had promised that the Savior would be a human, not an angel (Gen. 3:15; Heb. 2:16), and a Jew, not a Gentile (Gen. 12:1–3; Num. 24:17). He would be from the tribe of Judah (Gen. 49:10), and the family of David (2 Sam. 7:1–17), born of a virgin (Isa. 7:14) in Bethlehem, the city of David (Micah 5:2). All of this happened just as the Scriptures said, and Caesar unknowingly played an important part. A.T. Pierson used to say, “History is *God’s* story,” and President James A. Garfield called history “the unrolled scroll of prophecy.”

Mary accompanied Joseph for several reasons. The couple knew she would have the Baby during the time Joseph was gone, and they most likely did not want to be separated at that event. Also both of them knew that the Child was the Messiah. They also would have known that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2). The journey must have been very trying for Mary, but she rejoiced in doing the will of God, and she was no doubt glad to get away from the wagging tongues in Nazareth.

Mary, like many mothers in that day, wrapped her infant in long bands of cloth to give the limbs strength and protection. The word translated “manger” (Luke 2:7, 12, 16) can mean either a feeding trough or an enclosure for animals. If you have travel to the Holy Land you have seen ancient stone troughs that show us the type of manger in which Jesus was laid. It was not a place of comfort and luxury, but most lightly a cave where animals were sheltered.

Jesus was born in Bethlehem which means “house of bread,” the ideal birthplace for the Bread of Life (John 6:35). It was also the birthplace of Benjamin and David. Benjamin’s name means “son of my right hand,” and the name David means “beloved.” Both of these names apply to Jesus, as He is the Beloved Son (Luke 3:22) at God’s right hand (Ps. 110:1).

The first announcement of Jesus' birth was given by an angel to some anonymous shepherds. You might ask why the announcement wasn't made to priests or scribes, rather than shepherds. But, by visiting the shepherds, the angel revealed the grace of God toward humankind. Shepherds were really outcasts in Israel. Their work not only made them ceremonially unclean, but it kept them away from the temple for weeks at a time so that they could not be made clean. God did not have the angel make the announcement to the rich and mighty; but rather to the poor and the lowly (Luke 1:51–53; 1 Cor. 1:26–29). The shepherds also remind us that Jesus came to be both the Good Shepherd (John 10) and the Lamb of God sacrificed for the sins of the world (John 1:29). Some scholars have suggested that these shepherds may have been caring for the flocks that would provide sacrifices for the temple services. Therefore it was appropriate that the good news about God's Shepherd and Lamb be given first to humble shepherds.

Shepherds were practical men of the world who have little to do with fantasy and are not easily fooled. If they said that they saw angels and went and found the Messiah, then you could believe them. God selected hardworking men to be the first witnesses that His Son, the Messiah, had come into the world.

First, one angel appeared and gave the glad announcement; and then a chorus or army of angels joined him and gave an anthem of praise. This was the first time in centuries, the glory of God returned to earth. If brave shepherds were afraid at what they saw and heard, then you can be sure it was real!

Literally the angel said, "I announce to you good news, a great joy which shall be to all the people." In other words the Good News is for everybody, not just the Jews. The Good News was not that God had sent a soldier or a judge or a reformer, but that God had sent a Savior to meet human's greatest need. It was a message of peace to a world that had known so much war. The famous Roman Peace had been in effect since 27 B.C. but the absence of war did not bring the presence of peace. Epictetus said, "While the emperor may give peace from war on land and sea, he is unable to give peace from

passion, grief, and envy. He cannot give peace of heart for which man yearns more than even for outward peace.”

The angel announced that Jesus would bring *shalom* (peace) which means much more than a truce in the battles of life. It means well-being, health, prosperity, security, soundness, and completeness. It has to do more with character than circumstances. Life was difficult at that time just as it is today. Taxes were high, unemployment was high, morals were slipping lower, and the military state was in control. Roman law, Greek philosophy, and even Jewish religion could not meet the needs of men’s hearts. Then, God sent His Son! Now angels praised God at the beginning of this new creation. The whole purpose of the plan of salvation is “glory to God” (see Eph. 1:6, 12, 14). That lowly manger was a holy of holies because Jesus was there!

The shepherds said “Let us go now to Bethlehem” suggesting that they were located some distance away, but they were willing to make the trip in order to see the newborn Messiah. They would have arranged for others to care for their flocks while they hurried to Bethlehem. Halford Luccock called this “the first Christmas rush,” but it was certainly different from the Christmas rushes we see today!

The shepherds knew what to look for: a newborn Baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. After searching they found Him, the Messiah! They worshiped Him and marveled at God’s grace and goodness and the miracle God had brought for them. They didn’t get the good news to others, but shared it with other, “glorifying and praising God.” Then they humbly returned to their duties, new men going back to the same old job.

For some reason, shepherds were not permitted to testify in court, but God used some humble shepherds to be the first human witnesses that prophecy had been fulfilled and the Messiah had been born. The angels have never experienced the grace of God, so they can’t bear witness as the human shepherds could.²

²Wiersbe, Warren W.: *The Bible Exposition Commentary*. Wheaton, Ill. : Victor Books, 1996, c1989, S. Lk 2:1

The shepherds believed the message and went to confirm it for themselves. Their attitude contrasted sharply with that of the religious leaders who knew where the Baby was to be born but did not take the time or the effort to confirm it for themselves (Matt. 2:5).³

Some things we learn from this story are:

- If God's Word controls our lives, as Mary and Joseph understood, then the events of history only help us fulfill the will of God. In Jeremiah 1:12 God says: "I am watching over My word to perform it." We must be obedient like Mary and Joseph in allowing God to use us to fulfill God's promises in the world.
- "Fear not!" is one of the key themes of the Christmas story (Luke 1:13, 30, 74; and see Matt. 1:20). We do not have to fear. Jesus has come into the world to give us peace as Jesus gave his life to reconcile us to God.
- The shepherds are good examples for us to imitate today. They received by faith the message God sent them and then responded with immediate obedience.
- After finding the Baby, they reported the good news to others, "glorifying and praising God." They took the place of the angels! (Luke 2:13–14). Now it is our turn to report the good news to our family, friends and acquaintances.
- The angels have never experienced the grace of God, so they can't bear witness as we can.⁴ We experience God's grace and we can tell others that the Messiah has come.
- Telling others about the Savior is a solemn obligation as well as a great privilege, and we who are believers must be faithful.

Thank be to God for sending the Messiah. He has come!

³Walvoord, John F. ; Zuck, Roy B. ; Dallas Theological Seminary: *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures*. Wheaton, IL : Victor Books, 1983-c1985, S. 2:207

⁴Wiersbe, Warren W.: *The Bible Exposition Commentary*. Wheaton, Ill. : Victor Books, 1996, c1989, S. Lk 2:1