

The Birth of the Messiah (Lk 2.1-20)

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In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. ² This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³ And all went to be registered, each to his own town. ⁴ And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to 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, who was with child. ⁶ And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. ⁷ And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. ⁸ And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. ¹⁰ And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹ For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹² And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths 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, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!" ¹⁵ When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." ¹⁶ And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. ¹⁷ And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. ¹⁸ And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. ²⁰ And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Introduction

Luke introduces John and Jesus in parallel tracks, switching back and forth from one to the other. Most of the time he seems to "jump" between tracks, but, now and then, he draws a line connecting them. First, he presents the promise of the birth of John (1.5-25), followed by the promise of the birth of Jesus (1.26-38). Next, he sketches a meeting of the two pregnant women in which Mary visits Elizabeth; on that occasion John and Jesus cross paths (1.39-56); the tracks connect. In 1.56, we read that **Mary remained with her about three months and returned to her home**. At that point, the account shifts to events associated with the birth of John ending chapter one (1.57-80). In chapter two, Luke takes us back from John to Jesus (2.1-52), picking up the story line about Mary from 1.56.

This brings us to the text for this message today, Luke 2.1-20. It is interesting to consider why we should not confine our attention to the record of the birth itself that we have in the first seven verses. The reason may surprise many people, especially those who, shall we say, *exaggerate* the place of the birth of Christ within Christianity. They exaggerate by insisting on an annual day of celebration of His birth when Scripture nowhere commands that we set Christmas aside as a holy day or a holiday. Because of the distortion that results, the true meaning of the coming of Christ, the true meaning of His birth is misunderstood (blocked, diverted, and commercialized).

So in this study, we have to swim up stream, which is difficult to do, but we must try our best to be clear and bold in the proclamation of the good tidings and great joys of the gospel of Jesus. Therefore, we need to go "against the grain" as we cover two things: the fact of the birth of Christ and the purpose of His birth.

1A. The fact of the birth of Christ

If we were to restrict our meditation to the birth of Christ proper, which we have in 2.1-7, there seems to be a significant problem. The problem is that in this historical record we have no guidance from Luke on how he views this birth or how he wants us to view it. Pointedly, *from 2.1-7*, we have no precise idea that this is the birth of the Messiah, the Christ. Where do we get

that idea? We do have the promise of the virgin birth and the prophecies of chapter one that point us in this direction by implication. However, on this track of the narrative, it is the angel of the Lord who speaks of *Christ* the Lord (2.11). Thus, what we have in 2.1-7 is an explanation of the fact of Christ's birth *at Bethlehem*. There are two things in this account that show how historically aware Luke is when he explains how it came about that Jesus was born in Bethlehem. They are the action of Caesar and the ancestry of Joseph.

1) The action of Caesar

At the same time that Luke tracks the movement of Mary from her home in Galilee, he also gives a glimpse into the activity of the Roman emperor, Caesar Augustus. The emperor called for a registration of people across the entire Roman empire, which both practically speaking and in the minds of the Romans, engulfed the whole world (2.1, **In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered**). Moreover, Luke connects this event with the actions of the Roman governor of Syria, Quirinius, even indicating that this is the *first* registration (2.2, **This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria**). Later (in Acts 5.37), he will mention another registration (**in the days of the census**) that also occurred under the rule of Quirinius. These registrations were for taxation purposes (hence the KJV translation, "That all the world should be taxed"). Thus, one reason for the location of our Lord's birth is the action of Rome on a mega-scale that affected millions of people all over the known world of that day.

2) Another reason is the ancestry of Joseph

Registration was in effect a census, but the government did not send people to you; you had to go to the town of your fathers. Accordingly, Joseph, Mary's husband to be, had to travel to the town of his ancestry, which was Bethlehem, the city of David: ³ **And all went to be registered, each to his own town.** ⁴ **And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to 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, who was with child** (2.3-5). No doubt, part of the reason, at least, that Mary accompanies Joseph is that she is **his betrothed** and she is **with child**. However, she made quite a journey of about a hundred miles, perhaps, much of it on foot, to a strange city knowing that the time of delivery was near. So, Luke does not explain everything, but he does make it clear that world events within the Roman Empire brought a descendent of ancient king David, Joseph, **up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem** (2.4) and Mary came with him.

Thus, the action of Caesar and the ancestry of Joseph explain how it came about that Jesus was born at Bethlehem (2.7: **And she gave birth to her firstborn son**).

To be sure, looking for lessons, we can put this text back to back with the promise to Mary and emphasize the contrast of the promise there with the reality here. There the child to come is the Son of God and the heir of the throne of David: **And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end** (1.31-33). Here, His coming is hardly marked by kingly pomp and platitude: ⁶ **And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth.** ⁷ **And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn** (2.6-7). Our Lord Jesus Christ is the Lord of glory and the descendent of David. Explanation on how that can be the case in context of the virgin birth comes later by means of the genealogy in Luke 3.23-38. This Jesus, mind you, the son of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and David, according to the flesh, was born in a stable for animals, wrapped in torn garments, and placed in an animal's feeding trough! Remarkably, the most glorious king ever born was born in a stable! Of course, there is much here in the way of contrast and irony. The Son of God is God with us as the Son of

Man. He has paid us a visit even though we are lost in the wilderness of this fallen world. It is hard to find words for this marvelous fact of history.

Now let us return to the problem we discussed earlier. Namely, although we can draw out a number of striking contrasts, Luke does not guide us to think along these lines to get his point and apply it. Stating the problem this way makes us look beyond 1-7 to take in more of the context to find lessons and applications. When we do that we come to the account of shepherds and angels in which the purpose of the birth of Christ becomes unmistakably clear.

2A. The purpose of the Birth of Christ in 2.8-20

A survey of this part of the narrative reveals that the fundamental purpose of the birth of Christ is quite unexpected. To absorb it properly, we must think counter culturally. In the account of shepherds and angels, the text guides us to two things that we can state in the following simple sentence: the birth of Christ is for the glory of God in the gift of sovereign mercy.

1) First, the birth of Christ is for the glory of God

By reflection, it becomes clear that the account ascends in verses 1-13 to a peak in verse 14, *and* descends from that peak in verses 15-20. The birth of Jesus is so majestic in height, so profound in depth, that it demands one fundamental response from men and angels in confession and song: namely, "Glory to God in the highest."

a) Note how the text ascends to v. 14

The narrator takes us in thought, as it were, from earth to glory. On the day of the birth of Jesus, shepherds are nearby keeping watch over their sheep by night (2.8). They have an angelic visitation in two stages. In stage one, an angel of the Lord appeared to them with these words that interpret the event in Bethlehem: ¹⁰ **And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹²And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger."** The remarkable fact is that the good news, of great joy, and of a Savior-Messiah-Lord is a baby. The good news is that you will find Him lying in an animal's feeding trough and remarkably, the baby is a sign pointing away from His birth and Himself. Accordingly, in stage two, a multitude of angels appear and direct our thoughts *away* from the baby, and *away* from the manger, to the chief and ultimate end of the birth of Christ, which is the glory of God. Suddenly, abruptly, and forcefully myriads of angels gather to unite their voices in praise to God saying, **"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"** The peak is verse 14.

b) Now note how the text descends from v. 14

When the choir of angels dispersed, a sudden quiet slowly penetrated the midnight air as the shepherds decide to go to Bethlehem to **see this thing that has happened**, which the Lord made known to them: ¹⁶ **And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. ¹⁷And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. ¹⁸And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. ²⁰And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them** (2.16-20). Notice how the narrative descends from the mountain top of praise in verse 14. What happened when the shepherds found Joseph, Mary and Jesus? They reported the good news of great joy that God had made known to them about this child. After they gave their report, people wondered, Mary treasured up all these things in her heart, and the shepherds went back to their fields **glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them**. The narration peaks with angels glorifying and praising God, and it trails off into the night with shepherds glorifying and praising God. The only fact that seems out of place is the word about Mary treasuring and

pondering these things in her heart. This is not a displaced fact when we connect it with the emphasis on glorifying God because it shows how seeing the glory of God affects people of faith like Mary. The glory of God in the coming of Christ (the Savior-Messiah-Lord) is a treasure; it is something to be treasured by thoughtful meditative pondering deep down in our hearts.

2) Second, the birth of Christ is for the glory of God *in the gift of sovereign mercy*

Glory to God to the heights of heaven involves peace on earth to men with whom God is pleased. In other words, we are to glorify God because of His sovereign mercy.

Although an almost forgotten truth, in Luke 2:14, it is the sovereign election of God that ties the loose ends of the passage together. Glory to the highest interweaves with peace on earth to those upon whom God bestows His electing love.

To see this, you need to observe the difference in translation between the King James Version (KJV) and the English Standard Version (ESV).

KJV- Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.

ESV- Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!

The ESV reading has the best text critical support (cf. *The Text of the NT*, Metzger, 239-30). The idea is not peace and good will to men. More specifically, it is not even that God gives peace and good will to men so that they live at peace with one another (showing good will to each other). In this incorrect interpretation, good will is a gift God gives to men and a gift they display. Others read this half of the verse (14b) as a call to peace among men and a call to good will between people. However, we should emphasize that these interpretations begin with an incorrect reading.

Instead, the idea is that peace comes to those upon whom God bestows it according to His good pleasure. As Metzger puts it, peace on earth comes to "men of God's good will, i.e. those persons on whom his favour rests, chosen to be the recipients of the gift of his Messiah" (230). The good will of this text is not man's good will but God's good will. Moreover, it is precisely at a point like this that people wrongly place an accent on man rather than on God. An accent on man taints biblical Christianity by religious superficiality. In contrast to thinking horizontally on a merely human plane, this peace is not first between men. Jesus was born to secure peace between God and sinners; that is what is first in this peace.

Consider the wider biblical perspective. Many people are surprised at the biblical teaching that sovereign mercy is a fundamental reason for ascribing glory to God. God's electing love is a reason to glorify God to the highest. It is fitting, vital, and essential to worship. In the book of Acts, the early church addresses God in prayer as **Sovereign Lord** (a common OT way of addressing God) by whose hand Pilate, the Gentiles, and Israel did what He **had predestined to take place** (Acts 4.24, 28). We are to praise God as sovereign covenant Lord who says, **I will show mercy upon whom I will show mercy, and I will harden whom I will harden** (Rom 9.14-18). Therefore, Ephesians 1.3-6 tells us that God's electing love serves His glory: **Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, 4 even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love 5 he predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, 6 to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved.**

We can say nothing in our own favor or defense. To see the kingdom, to believe in Christ, the Messiah born in Bethlehem, and to embrace the Father are the gifts of sovereign mercy and these gifts bring peace between God and man. Therefore, we must ascribe glory to God in the highest!

How do these things apply to you?

The proper response to these things is worship with a profound sense that all glory, maximal glory, belongs to God. This yields three basic conclusions (contrary to Ryken, *Luke*, I, 71-75)

1) The great purpose of the birth of Christ teaches you the great purpose of your life

Grasping what He has done for you, beginning with the birth of Christ at Bethlehem, and knowing that you contribute nothing to your salvation, ought to move you to glorify the Father in heaven maximally, as the point of your life entirely. In the words of Paul: **"Whatever you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God"** (1 Cor. 10:31).

2) The purpose of the birth of Christ teaches you what to treasure

The truth to learn from this birth account is that the glory of God in sovereign mercy is a treasure. It is something to treasure and ponder in your hearts as did Mary in her heart. Treasuring and pondering this glorious salvation ought to lead you to say with the Psalmist that the knowledge of God, His ways, and His knowledge is **"too wonderful for me, it is high, and I cannot attain unto it"** (Ps. 139.6) because, O Lord, **"your right hand will hold me"** (139.10).

3) The birth of Christ teaches the lesson again of songs of praise and words of exaltation

The point is that when you take in the glory and take it to heart then you have to long for, and cry out for, a thousand tongues to say, preach, sing, and proclaim "my great redeemer's praise." So, remember what Peter says, **But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light** (1 Pet 2.9).

My we bow down before the majesty of our God with these words continually upon our lips: "glory to God in the highest," and may the Holy Spirit teach us that through the birth, the person, and the work of Christ, God displays His glory on earth, by giving peace among those upon whom He bestows His sovereign mercy! Amen