

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Luke's Gospel: The birth of the Lord Jesus Christ (Luke 2:1-38)

In Luke 2, the second chapter of his gospel, Luke brings us to the first major event in the life of the Lord Jesus, His birth. In his methodical, doctor's manner he records the details of where that birth took place and how it came to happen so far from the home of Mary and Joseph. On the human level, Luke tells us how the politics and finance of the day resulted in the couple undertaking an arduous journey south at a rather inopportune time. On the divine level, we are given insight into the eternal purposes and immediate actions of the Almighty God.

Let's read the first five verses of the chapter. *"And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This census first took place while Quirinius was governing Syria. So all went to be registered everyone to his own city. 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, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with child"* (Luke 2:1-5)

The birth place

Caesar Augustus needed more money, what politician does not, and before you can tax people efficiently you need good records of the population, so Caesar decreed that, *"All the world should be registered"*, Luke 2:1. For reasons that are not stated, everybody had to return to their native city for the census. Joseph was descended from King David and his family had roots in Bethlehem, so Joseph and Mary had to travel to Bethlehem. As we see so often in the Bible (and ought to recognise more often in our own lives), God is actually the one who is directing all that happens.

The prophet Micah revealed that Christ was going to be born in Bethlehem (*"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to Me the One to be Ruler in Israel"*, Micah 5:2) and so God directs the actions of Caesar to place the birth there. Of course Caesar had no understanding of God's purposes and was acting purely from his own motives, but God directed things to His own ends.

Luke also records for us the local governor of Syria at that time and so fixes both time and place so that nobody can dismiss the accounts of Jesus as 'fairy tales' with no connection to history. Ever the medical man, Luke records that Mary is *"great with child"* (Luke 2:5) and so sets the scene for the imminent birth.

The birth

The phrase, *"the days were accomplished that she should be delivered"* (Luke 2:6), seem to have a deliberate double meaning. On the mundane level, the doctor notes that 40 weeks are complete, and it is time for the baby to arrive. On the deeper level, this pregnancy, that God has planned from before the beginning of time, declared by an angel (Matthew 1:18-25, Luke 1:26-38) and accomplished by His own Spirit, has brought us to a hugely significant event in the history of the world. Mary's days and God's purposes are now to be accomplished.

Luke 2:7 is a very familiar part of the Christmas story, *"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."* In fewer than 30 words, Luke describes the advent of God Himself, come into His own world, as a tiny baby, wrapped in strips of cloth and placed in an animal food trough because nobody had any room for this family!

I just love the way the Bible's writers make the most astonishing statements in such straightforward, non-dramatic terms! God as a helpless, defenceless human baby; born to an ordinary mother. The Almighty One, wrapped in strips of cheap cloth and placed in a manger. The creator and possessor of everything, and nobody makes room for Him. You could contemplate, elaborate and speculate for pages and Luke states it so simply and plainly we can easily miss the importance of this world changing event.

The birth announcement!

Angels have a large part to play in the first two chapters of Luke's gospel. Interestingly they do not appear again in Luke's account (except as Jesus refers to them in His teachings) until the garden of Gethsemane, described in

Luke 22. Gabriel has already announced the births of Jesus (Matthew 1:18-25, Luke 1:26-38) and John (Luke 1:5-25), now an unnamed angel appears to some shepherds (Luke 2:9). It is instructive that when Matthew gives us the account of the wise men from the east and King Herod there are no angels mentioned (Matthew 2:1-12). At the start of Luke 2 we noticed that the great political leaders were directed by God to achieve His ends, with no understanding or cooperation on their part. Here, Luke tells us about some poor shepherds on the night shift and, to them, God sends His powerful and glorious heavenly messengers (Luke 2:8-20). These were people with very little wealth or position, camping out at night, risking their lives to protect a few sheep. We previously noticed the impact of the angel on the priest Zacharias in Luke 1:12 and it is no great surprise that this angel terrifies the shepherds. *“And, behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around about them: and they were greatly afraid”*, Luke 2:9. But the angel had not come to frighten them but to bring good news. *“Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people”* (Luke 2:10).

We are so familiar with the Christmas story that we overlook the huge contrast between Luke 2:11 and Luke 2:12. Luke 2:11 reads, *“For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord.”* Any informed Jew hearing that would be thinking about a might warrior and a wealthy ruler. A future head of state, and a leader of men into battles. But Luke 2:12 continues, *“And this will be the sign to you: you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger”!* Not the sign anybody would have been expecting! How God is turning the world upside down! Glorious angels appear to poor shepherds. Those same shepherds go to see a little baby, born to poor parents, who is the Sovereign of the universe! (Luke 2:15-16)

The praises of heaven

The angel finds this to be a reason to break into praises and he does not do so alone. *“And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!’”* (Luke 2:13-14).

God reaches out

We noticed at the start of this series that Luke writes as a Greek to a fellow Greek, and at a time when the gospel had spread out significantly among the Gentiles. We note that the angel announces here, at the very beginning of Jesus life, that the good news is for “all people”. I like the phrase in Luke 2:11, *“Unto **you** is born this day in the city of David a Saviour”* (my emphasis). Talking to insignificant shepherds, the angel says ‘this Saviour is for **you!**’.

As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1:27-29, *“But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen ... that no flesh should glory in His presence.”*

The effect

Having received the startling news from the angels, the shepherds do not sit around discussing the implications, or telling each other how amazed they are. *“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’”*, Luke 2:15. Notice that they, like Mary (Luke 1:38) but unlike Zacharias (Luke 1:18-20), trust implicitly what the angel has told them. They don't say, “Let us go and see if this message is true”. They say, (Luke 2: 15) *“Let us go... and see this thing that **has** come to pass.”* (my emphasis).

They are also men of action, and immediately set off for Bethlehem so they can see for themselves what has happened. They did not delay but *“came with haste”* (Luke 2:16) and so were some of the first to see the Saviour of the world as a little Baby *“lying in a manger”*. It is a good thing when a message from God's word makes us stop and think. It is an even better thing when it makes us take action!

The message begins to go out

Most of us like to share our good news. Today, you can post your message on Facebook and upload some pictures to illustrate it! The shepherds had no modern communications technology, but they could walk and talk, so that is what they did. The angel's message to them was passed on to anybody who would listen and their chief talking point was the child they had seen.

The last thing we read about these shepherds is that they, *“Returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told them”* Luke 2:20. What happy men! They believed the message of God that had been given to them; acted on it; went to see and hear for themselves, and came away praising. In fact they took up the praises of God as men on earth, which had begun with the angels in heaven! What a good example they have set for us to follow.

The effect of the message

The message that had such an impact on the shepherds, resonated with their hearers as well, *“And all those that heard it marvelled at those things which were told them by the shepherds.”* Luke 2:18. Who would have thought that a group of humble shepherds would be such good witnesses to such an important event? I suppose that everybody in the neighbourhood would know who they were, and they had maybe had nothing more important to tell the community in their whole lives than what wild animals might be in the area! Now I imagine them holding their audiences spellbound as they recount first hand testimony of angelic messengers and a Baby who they say is the long awaited Christ of God! Certainly, when God's message has had a real impact on ourselves, we are more likely to have an impact on those that we speak to about Him.

The effect on Mary

If the shepherds were marked by action, Mary is characterised by contemplation. *“But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart”*, Luke 2:19. Mary's life has been something of a whirl ever since the first angelic announcement of the child she was going to bear. More and more surprising and puzzling things seem to occur and she certainly does not understand them all. What she does do, is to remember them, and ponder on them, and contemplate what God might be doing.

God is faithful to His faithful servants

“And when eight days were completed for the circumcision of the Child, His name was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before He was conceived in the womb. Now when the days of her purification according to the law of Moses were completed, they brought Him to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, ‘Every male who opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord’), and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the law of the Lord, ‘A pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons’”, Luke 2:21-24

We are now given an insight into the lives of some of the Lord's faithful people who have been serving him quietly for many years. We also see Joseph and Mary faithfully obeying the directions of the laws of Moses, and making another journey, this time to the temple in Jerusalem (Luke 2:22). In passing, we notice the comparative poverty of Joseph and Mary because the offering of two pigeons was the smallest of the possible offerings for a firstborn son, as detailed in Leviticus 12:8. This fits with the stable and the manger that were part of the Lord's birth. There was only enough money for the essentials and no position or influence to gain a good room in a crowded inn or to make a costlier offering.

Simeon smiles!

The first faithful servant we are introduced to is Simeon, who is described as, *“Just and devout, waiting for the Consolation of Israel”* (Luke 2:25) In a general sense, we might say that the whole nation of Israel was waiting for the Messiah at this point in history. They were tired of the oppression of the Romans, and longed for a strong captain to set them free. But Simeon was different. God had, *“revealed to him by the Holy Spirit, that he should not see death, before he had seen the Lord's Christ”* (Luke 2:26).

Simeon led a life directed by God's Spirit. In the space of three verses it is said of him that, *“The Holy Spirit was upon him”* (Luke 2:25), *“It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit”* (Luke 2:26) and *“So he came by the Spirit into the temple”* (Luke 2:27). The reward for this faithfulness and obedience is that he finally gets to hold in his arms, the little baby who he knows to be God's salvation. Let's read Simeon's blessing. *“Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, according to Your word; for my eyes have seen Your salvation which You have prepared before the face of all peoples, a light to bring revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel”*, Luke 2:29-32. Again, we note that from the very beginning, the Lord is seen to have come to bring blessing that will spread out well beyond the nation of Israel.

Simeon seems to have waited into his old age to see the Child that God has told him about and is now ready to depart the world happily - *“Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, for my eyes have seen Your salvation”* (Luke 2:29) Of all those mentioned in the gospel accounts of Jesus birth, Simeon seems to have been given most insight by God into the future pathway that Jesus would follow - indeed he appears to have more insight than Jesus disciples often showed in the years that followed! He tells Mary that, *“This Child is destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign which will be spoken against (yes, a sword will pierce through your own soul also), that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed”* (Luke 2:34-35). So he understands that Jesus will not be immediately accepted by His people, and there is going to be opposition. He sees that people will need to be brought low by Christ before they can be raised up again. Simeon has been shown by God something about Christ's rejection, and perhaps, given the reference to Mary's soul being pierced by a sword, even something of His death. Certainly he foresees the

division and contention that Jesus will cause. Perhaps this is why he is ready to depart the world having seen the Baby. We might have expected that Simeon would be longing to live on to see the reign of the Messiah.

Who would want to see the first act, in the birth, and then not see the final act of God's mighty deliverance of His people by their long promised Messiah? Maybe he knew enough about what was to come to be happy to end his life having seen only the birth. These were certainly more things for Mary to remember and ponder! Luke 2:33 tells us, *"Joseph and His mother marvelled at those things which were spoken of Him."* This was before she heard the second part of Simeon's message. How she must have wondered and puzzled then!

Anna announces!

Next, we are introduced to Anna, another faithful servant. *"Now there was one, Anna, a prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, and had lived with a husband seven years from her virginity; and this woman was a widow of about eighty four years."* This elderly widow *"did not depart from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day"*, Luke 2:36-37. She dedicated all her time and energy to the praise and service of God, and she too was rewarded with being allowed to see God's own Son come into the world. In a similar vein to the shepherds, what she had seen for herself she was eager to pass on to others, *"And coming in that instant she gave thanks to the Lord, and spoke of Him to all those who looked for redemption in Israel"*, Luke 2:38. It seems that God had other faithful servants in His nation who work looking for His redemption, His saving work, and this older lady was enthusiastic in spreading the wonderful good news to them. Neither Simeon nor Anna seem like obvious heralds for the new King, but then neither did the shepherds! It seems that God, having sent His own Son in the most unexpected of ways, is now using unusual people to spread the good news of His coming.

We have met, in this section, with a series of men and women of faith, to whom God revealed His Son. Mary and Joseph have demonstrated their faith and obedience once again. The shepherds have shown themselves ready to believe and respond to God's message, and Simeon and Anna have exhibited faith and testimony in old age. They were all waiting for God's Messiah in their own particular places and circumstances and they all received God's blessing.

May we, as readers of Luke's gospel, show the same faith as we wait for Christ's return and enjoy His blessing in our own day and then tell other people about the good news that Jesus brings.

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