
Emmanuel: The Shepherds

Luke 2:1-20

Come Thou long expected Jesus, born to set Thy people free;
From our fears and sins release us, let us find our rest Thee.
Israel's strength and consolation, hope of all the earth Thou art;
Dear desire of every nation, joy of every longing heart.

Glory and joy - this is what "Emmanuel – God with us" meant to shepherds gathered on that night that Jesus was born.

The Lowliness of His Birth

(v.1-7)

These first paragraphs describe a story so familiar yet so distant. Luke is writing, not to satisfy our curiosity, but to establish the amazing facts around Jesus' birth.

¹ 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.

In their National Situation

(v.1-3)

The Jews are in subjection to Rome. Her haughty leaders and heavy hand rules most of the known world. So they issue a decree which will cause dislocation and chaos on a grand order. Instead of sending out census takers, they send the people to their ancestral homes. What arrogant authority used for self-serving means.

In all of this we see the moving of Divine providence and purpose. The heart of Caesar Augustus is in God's hand and is bent to bring about the necessity for this journey. God had purposed and promised that Jesus would be born in Bethlehem so God's providence moves powerfully bring for this decree. What else could possibly constrain Joseph and Mary to make this journey at this time?

There is a powerful lesson for us here. When Joseph was about to divorce Mary quietly, God sent Gabriel to direct Him. Yet, now, with clarity about where Jesus is to be born, God moves providentially to put Joseph and Mary where they ought to be. Understand then that God puts you where you ought to be with His precepts in the Word and by His providence in the world. This is why complaining is a sin. Complaining at bottom is our testimony that we do not believe that what God is doing is *good*.

In their Personal Conditions**(v.4-7)**

Joseph and Mary are affected directly.

The Difficult Journey**(v.4-5)**

Have you ever thought about this journey? Galilee is in the north in Israel while Bethlehem is in the south in Judah. It was a long and dangerous trek of almost 85 miles. Tradition has it that Joseph walked and Mary rode a donkey. It is quite possible that they rode in a cart. In any case, would you consider an 85 mile donkey or cart ride when you were nine months pregnant?

They get on the road running through Nazareth. They travel south, passing through Sychar and Joseph's well. Did they rest by that well where later Jesus would describe true worship? The city of Samaria is almost half-way. They saw Shechem off in the distance. There Abraham had been buried, Joseph had been sold and later, God established a city of refuge. The dusty road leads them through Bethel, where many patriarchal altars crumbled in the dust of passing time and human neglect. The mounds of Ai are visible from this road. The valley between Bethel and Ramah was the judgment place of Deborah. Through Ramah, the home of Samuel the prophet and where Israel first demanded a human king like the nations around them whose cruel sword would cause the weeping of Rachel's children. The road winds its way up to Jerusalem and then down again the final five miles to Bethlehem.

The Demeaning Birthplace**(v.6-7)**

They come, this son and daughter of David the King, to this small town and can find no place to sleep. Other texts describe her as being great with child – what a picture. There is no room in the inn. But there is a stable. Was it kindness or callousness that put her there? There is no crib, just a feeding trough. Is that what you would have wanted for your first born? Do you remember the joy of anticipation? The planning? To have it end in the grinding poverty of stables and mangers and barnyard smells and sounds?

But this is God's way. God will bring into world its Creator, its Sovereign, its Treasure among the beasts. It seems that God wants us to see with real clarity that it is not what surrounds us but what is in us that brings glory and joy.

And we in our warm homes and expensive cars and plentitude of clothes murmur and complain (sometimes we call it praying) about the insignificant things we don't have and the trivial difficulties we experience. Shame on us!

The Greatness of His Announcement**(v.8-14)**

What a shift in scenes. Imagine with me the view that Luke is giving us. The camera is tight on the weak cries of the babe and the gentle caress of a mother and the delighted smile of a father. It gradually pulls away to show a stable and then a street with a Holiday Inn then a town twinkling with candlelight and then dark hillsides dotted with flickering points of warming fires. Suddenly, it is BRIGHT.

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 great fear. ¹⁰ And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of 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!"

In the Hope of Angelic Proclamation

(v.8-12)

The shepherds are going about their regular work. It is springtime and they are out with the sheep, guarding them through the night. It is later in the evening of Jesus' birth. They are not in worship. But from all that appears about them in the rest of this text, they were men who loved God and hoped for His salvation.

The angel appears enshrouded with the brightness of heavenly glory and they are terrified. This is the case with angelic appearances. The soft mushiness of the modern claims to angelic visitations exposes the delusions and fancies. The penetration through into time of heavenly messengers from eternity almost always allows frightening glory to leak in around the edges.

But look carefully at his wonderful message.

In the midst of their fear, there is an encouraging word bringing calmness and peace. Fearing hearts dull hearing ears.

The gospel (good news) is about joy and gladness for all the people groups. This is not a new message. It is the marching theme of Isaiah and the shouted song of Psalms. "Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise You! Let the nations be glad and sing for joy" (Psalm 97:1). So the gospel is good news about gladness and glory!

The content of the message is truth about the Savior and Sovereign. He is born to be our Savior and to be our Sovereign. He is the Messiah and the Lord. This amazing sentence is like a tiny box containing immensely valuable jewels. There has been born for us a Savior; He is the Messiah (Christ); He is God. The humanity, identity, authority, Deity and saving purpose of Jesus are announced. The message is not about a program, or a place or a process or about possibilities. It is about the certainty of the fulfilled promises and faithful purposes of God, all centered on a person.

Authentication is given in the form of a sign. This is what signs in the Bible are always about. They are given so that *believing* hearts will have *assurance* as they can verify the authentic work of God. If they believe this message *and go to glorify and worship this baby*, these shepherds will know when they have found Him.

The parallels between the good news of this heavenly messenger and evangelism strike me. There are people to whom we speak, there is a declarative tone and there is the clearly understood and articulated message. And it is all about how we can be truly happy. Not the passing and unsatisfying happiness of sheep and pastures, homes and cars and wealth and power and position – but the eternally satisfying happiness of glorifying God by enjoying

Him forever. How do you present the gospel? Do we tend to talk about it in ways that reflect that it is good news of *great* joy – not just a little peace, or a bit of it all – *great* joy to all.

In the Honor by Angelic Praise

(v.13-14)

Imagine what Luke is describing here. Imagine looking into the brightest spotlight and standing in it is an even brighter shape of a heavenly messenger. And then the exultant message tumbles from his mouth like the crashing waves of eternity on the seashore of time. And then suddenly, the heavens are lit, not from behind like a lampshade, but as though the fabric of the universe were punctured by the presence and power and passion of this angelic adoration and glory streams through.

Listen to the text of their chant. And chant it is. This is what they *said*. I imagine the host to be a great responsive chorus so that phrase by phrase the round weaves in words the beauty of unspeakable glory.

Glory to God - May we sense how heavy the magnificence of God is. May we keep making Him great. May our hearts beat to exalt Him from the lowliest place to the highest position.

Peace to men - The message of the gospel is to bring peace to men who are at war with God. The gospel tells how you who have fallen short of the glory of God by sin can begin to glorify and enjoy God. Jesus has made peace by His blood on the cross.

Pleasure of God - The favor of God on people comes because it pleases God. Have you got this lesson deep in your souls. God gets pleasure in giving grace to you. So glory in the highest comes from men in lowest experiencing the peace and grace of a delighted God.

The clearer grasp we have of the supremacy and majesty of God, the greater praise we will lift.

The Joyfulness of His Worship

(v.15-20)

Luke seems to be stretching the vibrating of worship between the terror of glory and the thrill of joy.

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.

In the Purpose of Their Obedience**(v.16)**

But all of this is for nothing *if they do not believe in an obeying way*. They hear the messengers, they believe the message, and they hurry to see what God has wrought. They are not running foolishly all over. They hurry with determined purpose in the direction their obedience points them.

And they find Mary and Joseph and the baby. Now imagine. They hurry from door to door. "Has there been a birth here? Is the baby wrapped in swaddling clothes? Do you know where a newborn is?" At each door people were confronted by the breathless wonder of searching shepherds. Finally, they come to this Savior and Sovereign and bend with amazement over a feeding trough. This little one was all that the prophets had foretold. Here was freedom from sin and glory to God and gladness to all peoples. Wow!

In the Power of Their Proclamation**(v.17-18)**

What will the shepherds do now? They form an outreach committee and appoint a chairman. They select target audiences based on the latest survey of Bethlehem. They pick the most strategic times and locations and carefully prepare a culturally relevant presentation. No, they didn't.

They had an amazing reality in their lives that came through the power and purpose and promises of God. Look at how Luke gives us the core of *exaltation based evangelism*.

What they had *experienced was real* to them. They had seen the baby. It wasn't just something they had heard about. It was real.

They had a *clear message*. They went about telling all that had been told them about the baby. They in effect had the Word of God. This baby was the Savior and Sovereign – this is good news of gladness for all the world.

They *spread the word*. They mixed their experience with the message and went around telling people what had happened and what it meant. Do you think they were hesitant and fearful? Do you think they were concerned about what people would think? Not at all.

The *people were amazed*. Do we know, experience and share the good news of the redemption and rule of Jesus with such power and passion and sense the personal reality that people are amazed? Have we lost our sense of excitement and joy that wells up when we think or speak about Jesus? I am afraid that we can speak with more excitement and convincing reality about Santa Claus and the Easter bunny to our children than we do about Jesus to a lost and dying world. O that our exaltation would be an evangelism that amazes people!

In the Pondering of Her Treasure

Mary carefully reflected on what was happening in her life. I want to try to capture for us what is going on here in two words that should fuel our own reflection.

Memory - She is storing these memories up as valuable treasures. She does not want the poignant sharpness of these memories to fade over time. God wants us to often reflect

on what He has done in our lives so that we keep the grace and gladness clearly etched in our memories.

Meditation - She thinks and ponders and reflects on what is going on. She is not only storing up memories for future worship, but she is developing motivations for future obedience. She is evaluating her life and its events in the light of God's Word.

I am convinced that we need more time to treasure up in our hearts what God has done in our lives. Much of the enabling grace in the emergency of the moment comes from what we remember and from what we have reflected on of God's Word and God's will and God's wonder.

In the Passion of Their Praise

I wonder what the sheep thought when the shepherds returned? Did they look knowingly at one another in the way of beasts who see angels and wonders usually hidden from human view? Did they smile to themselves as they heard the excited voices of joyful praise making their way up the hillside? Did the glorifying and praising penetrate their simple sleep and stir golden dreams of heaven's glory and the Son who is Himself a lamb?

Or maybe they were like a lot of Christian sheep who simply graze comfortably and sleep sweetly and baa brightly. Listen to me. I am not advocating the excesses of many. But, we may well be going to heaven with little of heaven's joy. These shepherds vibrated with passionate praise because they had experienced the reality of God's supremacy and sovereignty and salvation. They were magnifying God in their glorifying.

Reflect and Respond

Turn in your hearts and with your whole lives to this One who has come into our world as the Savior and Sovereign. He will save you from your sin. He will rule your life with love. He will bring you eventually through pain and suffering to glory of being in His very Presence to gaze with rapturous wonder on His character.

May the exaltation of Jesus Christ become our evangelism. May God so burn in our hearts that we will spread like a wild fire the message of the good news of the glory and gladness of God.

May the praise of hearts passionate for the magnificent message of God penetrate our stupor and sleep and stir up our affections and fuel in us fiery worship that burns bright with holy happiness.