

Jesus' Birth (Bethlehem's Child Cantata)

Luke 2:1-20 on December 15, 2024

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Please read Luke 2:1-20 before going further in this transcript.

In Luke chapter 2, we read about Mary giving birth to her son, Jesus, just as the angel Gabriel had prophesied back in Luke 1:31, "You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus."¹ Luke 1:37 continues to echo our ears, "For no word from God will ever fail." Jesus' birth reveals many important details about who He is, what He's like, and how He meets our deepest human need.

Jesus' birth...

1) Reveals that God's sovereign plan of salvation unfolded within actual events of human history.

Luke 2:1-3 begins, "In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. 2 (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) 3 And everyone went to their own town to register." Once again, we see Luke following through with his opening commitment to draw up an orderly account of the things that were fulfilled among them.² He directly connects Jesus' Birth to actual events in human history, one of those events being a census, the main purpose of which would have been to measure data for military service and taxes.³ However, in His providence, God used this decree from the pagan Roman Emperor, Caesar Augustus, and the Syrian Governor, Quirinius, to fulfill what He'd promised back in the Old Testament.^{4 5 6}

Some 700 years earlier in human history Micah 5:2 predicted, "Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times." Luke 2:4-5 records the fulfillment of this prophecy, "So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. 5 He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child."

¹ Luke 2:21 records that Jesus was given His name at His circumcision, when He was 8 days old.

² See Luke 1:1-4.

³ "Luke takes special interest in relating his narrative to events of world history." *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1703 footnote on Luke 2:1.

⁴ See *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1703 footnote on Luke 2:1.

⁵ Quirinius = "kwih RIN ih uhs" (W. Murray Severance and Terry Eddinger, *That's Easy for You to Say: Your Quick Guide to Pronouncing Bible Names* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1997), 134.

⁶ To put it another way, in obedience to a royal decree, Jesus' parents *fulfilled* God's divine will.

So Joseph, and a very pregnant Mary, traveled from Nazareth in the north, to Bethlehem in the south. It was a journey of about 90 miles, which would have likely taken them about 3-5 days, if not more.⁷ God had big plans for this little town of Bethlehem, which is why today's cantata refers to Jesus as "Bethlehem's Child." God was doing something big in this little town, through this little baby boy. So we can add the prophecy of Micah 5:2 to the list of all the other Old Testament fulfillments recorded in Luke's Gospel.

All of these events and details were being carefully orchestrated by the God of heaven, all according to His good and perfect plan. Galatians 4:4-5 says it this way, "But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship." It's important for us to understand just how carefully God planned out every detail of our salvation. The Christmas story isn't something that was fabricated by someone's human imagination, in order to sell Christmas toys, or to give us a good excuse to use up our remaining vacation days. As we celebrate the birth of our Savior, we can do it with complete confidence that the living God loves us, and made a way for our salvation within real human history.

Jesus' birth also...

2) Reveals that we have a humble Savior

who is an approachable King.

Luke 2:6-7 says, "While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them." When Jesus was born, He was placed in a feeding trough for animals; there was no fancy hospital suite, or anything like that. Our Savior came in great humility, in meekness, despite His majesty.⁸ 2 Corinthians 8:9 says, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich." So our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, left the riches and comforts of heaven, in order to come to this earth and dwell among us in human frailty and humility.

When our Immanuel, our "God with us," came to earth in human form, He came as a baby, and even though this is now common knowledge for many of us, each Advent season we need to pause and remind ourselves once

⁷ This assumes that they would have gone around Samaria. Some scholars say it was at least a 3-day trip, but come on folks, Mary was pregnant, so it likely took them significantly longer. We can't be certain though.

⁸ It's worth noting that there's actually no mention, anywhere in the Bible, of Jesus being born in a stable. Verse 7 does however mention a manger, referring to a feeding trough for animals, which is why we think Jesus was likely born in a stable, or perhaps in some kind of a cave that had been converted into a stable. See *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1703 footnote on Luke 2:7.

again just how remarkable this is!⁹ The transcendent God of the universe, who is so incredibly immense, and powerful, and completely beyond us in every way, made Himself very small, and defenseless, and immanently close to us.

What could be more innocent and approachable than a baby?^{10 11} The incarnation of our mighty Savior and Messianic King, brings God near to us in one of the most non-threatening ways that we might imagine: a humble infant. So even though the shepherds were frightened by the appearance of the angels, little baby Jesus didn't frighten anyone. Jesus became fully human so that we would feel comfortable approaching Him, and so that we would know that He can personally empathize with our human weakness and vulnerabilities. Jesus went on to live a fully human life so that we could know without a doubt, that He understands us fully, and thus He can represent us fully, because He is fully one of us.¹²

Jesus' birth also...

3) Reveals that Jesus is a Savior for all peoples.

Luke 2:8-10 says, "And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. 9 An angel of the Lord appeared to 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. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for *all* the people." God sends some of His angels to appear to this particular group at this particular time. And Luke records it for us, not only to make us aware of what happened, but also to make us ponder the ramifications. These shepherds are a good representation of everyday people, and they help to illustrate just how far God's salvation was meant to reach: to the regular folks out in the fields doing they're regular jobs. These men worked outdoors all year long, at times weathering harsh conditions, so that they could protect their flocks from thieves and predators.

My *NIV Study Bible* notes that "The flocks reserved for temple sacrifice were kept in the fields near Bethlehem throughout the year."¹³ But the angels didn't appear in the temple this particular night, among the priests

⁹ See Isaiah 7:14 and Matthew 1:22-23.

¹⁰ Note how a manger was the particularly odd sign that God chose in Luke 2:12.

¹¹ This makes me reflect back to Psalm 8:2 from last Sunday and how God establishes a stronghold through the praise of children and infants. It also makes me think of Paul Harvey's wonderful account of "The Man and the Birds." If you've never heard it, check it out here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WhXrZctyxWY>

¹² Hebrews 4:15-16 says, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need."

¹³ *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1703 footnote on Luke 2:8.

who would sacrifice these animals, they appeared out in the fields, among the common folk raised them. These shepherds stand in stark contrast to those whom we might have deemed more appropriate recipients of such important news: the religious leaders who served in God's temple, men who were well-dressed and well-educated in theology. (Men like the priest Zechariah back in Luke 1.) Instead though, on this particular night, the good news is brought directly to these manual laborers, some of whom were probably a little rough around the edges, and who probably exuded more than a little body odor, as well as animal odor. But here's the point: the good news that a Savior has been born, isn't just for an elite few religious folks. Verse 10 highlights what God is doing here: He's making sure that the good news is delivered in such a way that it causes "great joy for *all* the people."

Luke 2:11-14 goes on, "Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. 12 This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." 13 Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, 14 "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests." Verse 11 has a ton of theological truth packed into it! The town of David, aka Bethlehem, was mentioned earlier in verse 4, and it's repeated again here in verse 11. You see, King David himself was born and raised in Bethlehem.¹⁴ This little town of Bethlehem is significant to Luke's message, which is why he refers to it twice, highlighting not only that Jesus is "Bethlehem's child" but also that He is "King David's child".

In other words, calling Bethlehem the "town of David" spotlights Jesus' direct connection to King David, and the prophetic fulfillment that's going on here. Jesus is the final and ultimate King who has come to reign forever and ever. His kingship fulfills the Davidic promises of the Old Testament. In the words of Luke 1:32-33, "He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, 33 and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end." Can't you just hear the words of Handel's Hallelujah chorus? "And He shall reign forever and ever! Hallelujah! Hallelujah!"

God has sent His angels to announce the birth of a Savior... but a Savior from what? Well, this will become more and more clear as Luke's Gospel progresses. But here's a hint: even though we're not sure how long Jesus needed to borrow this manger for His bed, this would not be the last thing He would need to borrow; one day, when He becomes a fully grown man, He'll also borrow someone's tomb... but He'll only need it for 3 days.

¹⁴ See 1 Samuel 17:12; 20:6.

Jesus' birth not only...

3) Reveals that Jesus is a Savior for all peoples; but also that He is our Messiah and Lord, the God-Man.

Verse 11 clarifies, "Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord." This Savior child is none other than Israel's promised, and long-awaited, Messiah, who came to rescue not only the Jews, but all peoples on earth. He came to teach and preach, and to serve and suffer, and to take on Himself the punishment for our sins. This fully human child, who has been born as Savior and Messiah, is rightly referred to as "the Lord," indicating that He is also fully God.¹⁵ Theologians call this the hypostatic union, when God became flesh: fully God, and fully human. Jesus is the "God-Man" who offers each one of us forgiveness and new life through faith in Him.¹⁶ All of this explains why this tiny little baby wrapped in cloths, and lying in a manger, elicits the angelic praise: "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

This leads right into our closing point, Jesus' birth...

4) Prompted curiosity, which led to praise-filled amazement, and spreading the word!

Luke 2:15-16 says, "When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." 16 So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger." In terms of Luke's narrative here, there are at least two things that stick out to me:

First of all, if the shepherds hurried off to find "Mary and Joseph, and the baby," did anyone stay back to watch over the flocks? Well, I'm guessing the new guy probably had to stay back, unless they found somebody to cover the rest of their shift.

Secondly, and more importantly, the angel didn't specifically tell them to go find baby Jesus, but he did say that *when* they found Him, it would be a sign to them that He'd be wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. So apparently the amazing events that happened that night created enough curiosity in the shepherds, that the angel was confident they'd want to head

¹⁵ "For Luke, this title [the Lord] will become the key Christological term to describe Jesus... For now, Luke is content merely to present the term from the angelic announcement and not explain it. Thus, it here serves a literary foretaste of what is to come. The term will clearly come to refer to the absolute sovereignty and divine relationship that Jesus possesses as the one who brings salvation. ...its presence here suggests that there is more present in Jesus than his merely being Messiah." Darrell L. Bock, *Luke, Vol. 1, 1:1-9:50*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 1994.

¹⁶ See Acts 2:36.

into town and look for Jesus. This is a good reminder to those of us reading this text today: we should embrace the awe and wonder surrounding Christmas, and we should allow our curiosity to cause us to check and see for ourselves. In fact, even Jesus' own mother was curious, wondering about all of these things. Luke 2:19 says, "But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart."¹⁷

In other words, even those closest to Jesus, those who had a personal, face-to-face encounter with an angel, didn't fully comprehend all that was going on that first Christmas night. They were wondering about all that was happening. So we're in good company when we investigate our own curiosity, and when we carefully consider the ramifications of Jesus and the Christmas story.

Luke 2:17-18, 20 conclude, "When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, 18 and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them." ...20 The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told." Let's be sure that we respond in a similar way this morning! Let's be mindful of our opportunities to "glorify and praise God" this Christmas season. And, let's be mindful of our opportunities to "spread the word" by telling others the good news that a Savior has been born! Invite someone to church next Sunday or to our Christmas Eve service on the 24th.

May the Good News of Jesus' birth, cause great joy for all people!

¹⁷ Mary seems to continue in this vein throughout Jesus' childhood. Note Luke 2:51 when Jesus is 12 years old.