

The Shepherds and the Sign Luke 2:11-12

Introduction

"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. So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered. 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. Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid. Then the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this *will be* the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger." 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!" 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." And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger. Now when they had seen *Him*, they made widely known the saying which was told them concerning this Child. And all those who heard *it* marveled at those things which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary kept all these things and pondered *them* in her heart. Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told them. (Luke 2: 1-20 NKJV)

According to Luke, at some point in time Caesar Augustus had decided to collect taxes and conduct a public census at the same time. That policy is what brought Joseph and Mary to the little town of Bethlehem since Bethlehem was their city of birth. Mary was Joseph's espoused wife, meaning, she was legally married to Joseph but, as was the custom, they were still in the period of waiting until the wedding feast. However, Mary was great with child and Joseph wasn't the father, which made for a very scandalous situation. According to Mary, and now scripture, the child had been conceived by the Holy Spirit; making the child she carried the long-awaited Christ or Messiah. How many of you know it would take a lot of faith to believe that story! In fact, it still does.

While they were in Bethlehem, Mary gave birth to a son. If her story is true, this would make the birth of her son the most unusual and incredible birth in all of history.

First of all, at least in that day, it would have been miraculous that Mary could give birth as a virgin. But even more amazing is that through this birth the Son of God came into human flesh. You would think volumes would have been written about the details and significance of this type of Messiah birth. Yet, all that is mentioned of this miraculous birth is found in verse 7, "she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn". Why the brevity? Probably because everything about God is so miraculous, He feels no need to explain himself. Miracles are His normal! However, the birth of this wonderful child must be announced because God's plan for all of mankind rests upon the shoulders of this babe in a manger.

And so an angel from heaven is sent to announce His birth. But the angel comes with glad tidings not to the kings and princes of the land or to even to the teachers and nobles of the people. The angel first appears to lowly shepherds outside of Bethlehem, keeping watch over their flock by night. What I want to focus upon tonight is the words of the angel to the shepherds in verses 11 and 12.

For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this *will be* the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger." (Luke 2:11-12 NKJV)

I. A Savior Is Born

From the angel the shepherds learned of the birth of the Christ; the anointed one, the Messiah. "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord." The angel tells the shepherds a Savior had been born! A Savior is a deliverer. A Savior is one who turns woe into joy and happiness.

Rome had declared that its subjects were to call their emperor, Caesar Augustus, the savior. But how was Caesar a savior? He may have relieved the physical poverty and oppression of a few. But, more often than not, he added to the oppression of the lands he conquered. He was only hailed as a savior because he demanded it or face the consequences.

The angel's announcement was about the birth of a true Savior; one that would truly deliver the people from their sins and the misery sin causes. Jesus would offer them a joy that no Emperor ever could. This babe was the Anointed One. He was the One ordained by God to be His prophet, priest, and king.

God had promised long ago to send such a deliver. All of the Old Testament prophets, priests, and kings paved the way for the Anointed One to come. And as the Anointed One this babe born in Bethlehem would make the salvation of God available to every person. The angel also emphasizes that this babe is the savior of the world but He is also the Anointed One who is the Lord.

This babe in a manger was destined to be a ruler. He is Christ, *the Lord*. As the Messiah Lord and King, he was the rightful heir to the throne of his forefather David. He was even born in the city of David as the promised son of the King,

whose kingdom God had promised to establish forever. It would be under His rule and in His kingdom that the people of God would find their salvation. His salvation far exceeded anything that the Caesar could offer. But how is that possible considering the lowliness of His birth.

Jesus is wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger. That fact is mentioned twice—once as Luke describes the birth of Christ in verse 7 and again by the angel that announces Jesus' birth to the shepherds in verse 12. The meaning is clear. He was wrapped tightly in a band of cloth to keep him warm and still. Then Joseph laid him in the feeding trough full of hay. How unusual that one destined to such greatness was born in such humble circumstances!

II. A Sign Is Given

According to the angel, the swaddling clothes and the manger were to serve as a sign to the shepherds. Unlike the pictures we see on Christmas cards, Jesus was not born in an out building behind a motel in Bethlehem. The truth is Jesus was born in a cave used for the birthing of sacrificial lambs. The male lambs born in that cave were used exclusively in the Temple sacrifices. They were set-aside to be the TAMIL, or the morning sacrifices which began each day. They were also used for the burnt offerings. The female lambs were used for peace offerings.

Most of the lambs born in Bethlehem were destined to become Passover lambs. Therefore, the shepherds that attended them were actually shepherd-priests who were assigned the task of "keeping watch" over the Temple's flocks. One of their tasks was to make certain that none of these lambs were blemished while being birthed. According to the Mishnah, these lambs were immediately wrapped in "swaddling cloths" after their births to protect them from injury, since baby lambs tend to thrash about and harm themselves in their first couple of hours of their lives.

The shepherds who tended these lambs were required to keep the birthing caves ritually clean. Since there was no room for Mary and Joseph at the local caravan house, they were allowed to occupy one of these birthing caves in the hillside. That birthing cave is now said to be found beneath the ancient Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. According to the Gospel account, as soon as Jesus was born, Joseph wrapped him in swaddling cloths.

We would think that God would have chosen a palace in Rome, or Alexandria, or Antioch, or even Ephesus as the birthplace for the King of kings. But He didn't! God chose a cave carved into the side of a Judean hillside. Many of the lowest of peasants were born in better places than this.

After Mary gave birth to Jesus in this cave, Joseph cut the umbilical cord. Then, the body of Jesus was thoroughly washed with salt water. The salt would kill any bacteria that might be found on the child. Once those tasks were completed, Jesus was wrapped in strips of swaddling cloth to keep him warm and safe. Since Jesus was born in a birthing cave for sacrificial lambs and these lambs would be wrapped

in "swaddling cloths" immediately after their birth, no doubt there were swaddling cloths there in the cave. Then a place was needed to lay the child so that the afterbirth could be washed away, but all he could find was a feeding trough or what we now call the manger, where the baby lambs were laid.

Not long after the birth of the Messiah, God allowed the shepherds who "kept watch" over the Passover lambs, to be the first to realize and pay homage to the one destined to be the sacrificial lamb that would take away the sins of the world. Each day of their lives these priestly-shepherds prepared the sacrificial lambs for sacrifice especially at the time of Passover. So these priestly-shepherds definitely looked forward to that day when the Messiah would come and deliver Israel and set up God's Kingdom on earth! So when the angel said, "This shall be a sign to you" the shepherds knew exactly what the angel meant.

The Bible speaks a great deal of signs. A sign was something unusual that served to prove the truth of what was either spoken or promised. The sign also depicted in some way what it was designed to prove. All of Jesus' miracles were signs that verified and depicted Jesus as the Savior.

According to Isaiah 7:14 the virgin birth of Christ itself was a sign: "Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel." Sometimes people would ask for a sign because what they were told stretched their faith. Zechariah, for example, asked for a sign because he struggled to believe the angel's promise that he and his wife would have a son in their old age who would be the forerunner of the Christ. And he was given a sign. He was made deaf and dumb as a sign of his unbelief.

The angel also gave a sign to the shepherds. The angel had just announced the birth of the most important person in all history. God verified this fact to the shepherds with a sign. The sign would distinctly prove to the shepherds that the Savior, who is Christ the Lord, had been born! The very purpose of their existence has now been validated by the birth of Jesus the Christ.

III. Salvation Is Accomplished

But the sign was also personal. The angel said, "This shall be a sign to you!" Their sign was that the Messiah would be found wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. Many people, even today, miss the meaning of the angel's announcement to the shepherds. But these shepherds knew exactly what it meant! The sign makes no sense to those who are only looking for an earthly kingdom; which included many of the Jews in Jesus' day. They sought a restoration of the glory days of David and Solomon that would bring earthly wealth and power to Israel.

That is still the focus and goal of many people today who envision a heaven here on earth in which all the ills that have plagued mankind through history are finally overcome through man's achievements.

A manger birth in a stable isn't a picture of nobility most people would think of. If Jesus came to establish of an earthly kingdom with an earthly salvation and glory, we would expect him to be born in a royal palace, attended by miraculous and unusual circumstances that would have impressed even the royalty of the world. The humble birth of Jesus is God's sign that the Messiah would be a Savior who came to establish a salvation that is heavenly and spiritual.

Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world". Jesus came to awaken the spirit of God within a person's heart. To receive citizenship in this spiritual kingdom would require a humble heart willingly to bow before Jesus and serve Him as King. It is a kingdom of righteousness whose citizens are devoted to living right! It is a kingdom of peace where the righteous live in Christ and God's love casts out all fear. It is a kingdom of joy where the people of God are bound together in the friendship and fellowship of Christ. It is a kingdom that has its beginnings in this age but finds completion in eternity in a new creation. It is a kingdom in which, all tears shall be wiped away and there will be no more pain and no more sorrow. It is a kingdom of salvation where Jesus delivers us from sin and the fear of death and promises us a new and eternal life.

It is His humility that levels the playing field and opens the door of fellowship with God to everyone. God will always give you a sign of his willingness to get involved in your life, but are you humble enough to receive it? Don't let your preconceived notions or your self-centered goals override God's sign that he loves you and wants you to discover and fulfill the purpose for which you were created.

Jesus came to take your sins and the sins of the whole world upon Himself and bear our punishment upon the cross. But you must be willing to humbly receive his forgiveness for your sins and allow him to fulfill your heart's desire.

Conclusion

To provide this perfect salvation, Jesus had to walk in perfect obedience and righteousness before them. The work of atonement would consume His entire earthly ministry, culminating at the cross. His perfect humility revealed the great poverty of our sin and the reason for why Christ came. It ultimately pointed ahead to the cross. Pride cannot abide humility. Pride caused Satan to rebel against God. Pride is what causes us to reject Christ. Pride is what caused men to nail the perfect, humble, sinless, Son of God on a Cross. When the shepherds received the sign that a humble Messiah had been born, they went and worshipped Him.

Luke writes, "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." And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger.
(Luke 2: 15-16 NKJV)

Why was the sign given to lowly shepherds and not to the leaders in Jerusalem?

Could it be the shepherds were looking in faith for something that would change their lives? Could it be that they were looking for the coming of the Savior?

Their response says it all. They spread abroad what they had seen and heard. This stands in sharp contrast to the unbelief of those who never sought out the Christ nor spoke about Him. The force of the angel's message is clear: "unto you is born this day...a Savior, which is Christ the Lord." The sign has been given. "You will find the child wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger."

These lowly, uneducated shepherds perceived the meaning of the sign. In humility they came and bowed before an infant in a manger! Why? Because they saw, in faith, God's plan of salvation. That encounter changed their lives! How do we know? Because the shepherds didn't go back to their mundane lives; they joyfully spread abroad all that they had seen and heard.

So when God's message of love and deliverance come to you, does it change you? Or like Herod, is your worship only pretense? My prayer is that you will follow the shepherds and joyfully spread the good news of the Savior's birth and work in your own heart.