12-22-19

Luke 2:1-20

What a beautiful and wonderful account of the birth of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. What a beautiful and wonderful account of the glory of God. We tend to think of Jesus coming to earth in terms of ourselves; that He came to save us from eternal separation from God. And that is exactly what He did. But we must not stop there. This account of the first Christmas is an account of how glorious God is. It is a demonstration of His power, His sovereignty, and His love for the people He created.

Caesar Augustus was the very powerful emperor of Rome. He had full control of the empire; whatever he said is what took place. Regardless of his worldly power, Proverbs 21:1 is in effect. The king’s heart is *like* channels of water in the hand of the Lord; He turns it wherever He wishes. So, in those days of Jesus’ birth, Augustus issued a decree that a census be taken of the entire Roman empire. The Caesar may have had his own reasons for ordering the people counted, but the sovereign will of God brought it about with perfect timing in order to fulfill what He had said through the prophet Micah in 5:2.

But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,  
*Too* little to be among the clans of Judah,  
From you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel.  
His goings forth are from long ago,  
From the days of eternity.

Last week, we read in the Gospel according to John, that the Word, Jesus, had existed from eternity past with the Father. We see that again in this prophecy that the ruler, Jesus, existed long ago from the days of eternity. We are all familiar with the account of the angel Gabriel, appearing to Mary and giving her the news that she would be with child, even though she was a virgin. Also, this child would be a ruler, on the throne of David forever. All these things show that Jesus is God who was from eternity past and will be throughout eternity future.

In whatever way the census was carried out, it caused Joseph to travel to the birth town of his ancestor, David. Because Mary was espoused to him, she had to accompany him on the journey of about seventy miles. God brought these things about in order that His Son would be born in Bethlehem. A thousand years before this, David had been born in this same town. This little town was still there after ten centuries, in spite of two devastating invasions; one by the Assyrians and one by the Babylonians. All this time, God was busy working things out to fulfill His promise to David that one of his descendants would sit on his throne.

What a powerful God we serve; He can keep in line all the minute details of events throughout history. During this time, God oversaw the rise and fall of four world empires and the rise of the current world empire of Rome. He brought to the Roman throne Caesar Augustus to decree this census, just as He had raised up the Pharaoh of Egypt to stubbornly resist His commands through Moses. God’s glory shows through in all this; these kings imagined their own glory when all they were doing was demonstrating God’s.

This Caesar Augustus began the idea of the Roman emperor being deity. He wanted to be worshiped as a god and was declared to be the son of Zeus. Augustus had some titles for himself, including “savior of the world”. There are inscriptions about Augustus that describe him as savior, god, son of god, and they also associate him with peace, hope, and good news. Does all this sound familiar?

So, while Caesar Augustus proclaimed himself deity and his promoters spread the word of all his attributes, God quietly brought the true Saviour of the world, as a new-born baby, laying in a feed trough. In this child, God will bring about peace and He is the good news. In Him we have true hope. Not only is He the Saviour, but He is the Son of God, and He is God. Notice that God brought all this about without consulting Caesar. Also notice that Augustus is dead, his body long ago turned to dust. Jesus is alive, seated on His throne at the right hand of God the Father.

This story of the first Christmas once again shows us that God doesn’t do things the way we would. And once again, we are amazed at His wisdom, because everything works out exactly the way He wants it to. We are being taught how far above us He really is; He is true God; we are simply His creation. Our Father had His Son born to peasants, and born in a place where farm animals are kept; He couldn’t even be born in a guest room. Yet, here we are, two thousand years later, and from these humble beginnings His Kingdom has spread all over the entire world.

We also might think that almighty God would announce the birth of His Son to the entire world; He has the power to do so. In fact, we know that when Jesus comes back the whole world will know it. But this is not what God did; instead He put on a spectacular display to a group of shepherds who were calmly watching over their sheep during the night.

God had built a history of shepherds. Moses spent forty years as a shepherd before God put him as leader of Israel. David spent his early youth as a shepherd before God made him a leader of men and of a nation. Leading sheep is good training for leading people. Sheep are stubborn, practically defenseless, get lost, and make poor decisions. It is with good reason that the people of Israel, and we who are Christians, are described as being like sheep. The child newly born in Bethlehem would be the Good Shepherd; even to the point of laying down His life for His sheep.

Some of the shepherds would have been sleeping; some would have been awake for their turn at watch, keeping an eye on the sheep. This was their occupation, something they had been doing for years with very little excitement. Suddenly, an angel is standing before them. He came out of nowhere; just appeared. At the same time, the whole area, including the shepherds, were covered in the glory of the Lord. The Greek word for glory has the idea of light and brightness; the Hebrew word for glory has the idea of light and weight. The shepherds are all wide awake now, bathed in a light such as they have never experienced and actually able to feel its weight pressing on them.

No wonder they were scared. These were men who lived outside most of the time and fought off bears and wolves with sticks and rocks. But they were scared now. There is good reason to fear the Lord. The angel spoke calming words to them. It is good for us to have a healthy respect and fear of God, but at the same time, He wants to have fellowship with us, and that can’t happen if we are in terror of Him. That’s why it is so important to realize that He is our Father. Just like with our earthly father, there is some fear, but we can come to him any time we need him and he will care for us. Earthly fathers don’t always do this right, but God the Father does.

This kind of display of God’s glory hadn’t been seen on the earth for several centuries. These shepherds got to experience it and received special news from the angel. The long-awaited Messiah was here. They could go see Him in Bethlehem. The angel gave them a sign; told them what to look for. It would have been unusual to find a baby in a trough. Notice that He is the good news; He is the Gospel.

Then, because human shepherds are like sheep too, God made sure they didn’t miss the point. More angels appeared, singing God’s praises. There is something here we don’t want to miss. We have seen many pictures portraying this event; many pictures drawn by artists with the angels there, praising God. These pictures usually show five or six angels and this is the image we have in our minds. But the Bible tells us that there was a multitude of the heavenly host. There was an army of angels. There were not just a few, but a huge number of them there before the shepherds and they were praising God and giving a promise to men.

They sang of God’s glory because He had made a way to save His creation. The One who would crush the head of satan had come to the earth and He would fulfill the salvation promises God had made. These angels gave the shepherds words of peace of which they wouldn’t have understood the full meaning. But the Bible has explained to us that we who have faith in Jesus Christ are the ones in whom God is pleased. We can have peace in this life that is beyond understanding; we are also promised eternal peace once we leave this earth and live with Jesus.

It is always wonderous to see who God gives his revelation to. In this case it was shepherds. At this time in history, they were lowly and outcasts. Shepherds were not allowed to testify in court. Yet this is who God chose to be the first witnesses to the birth of the Saviour. In the same way, over thirty years later, God chose women to be the first witnesses to the resurrection of the Saviour. Women were not allowed to testify in court either. God has His own wise ways and means of fulfilling His plans; He is not bound by the rules of mankind.

Having delivered their message, the angels didn’t wonder off into the Judean hills; the shepherds watched them return to heaven. What a response the shepherds had! If only all people would respond to the Saviour in this way. But men love the darkness rather than the light. “Let us go straight to Bethlehem then, and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has made known to us.” They rushed into the town and would have had to ask around to find out where a baby had been born and was staying in a manger. They saw the child, just as the angel had said, and believed.

Mediterranean people tend to be high-strung and excitable anyway; can you imagine how these shepherds must have been acting; Wide-eyed and telling everybody they found what they had seen and heard? These first evangelists of Christ finally returned to their work, forever changed. And they continued to give glory to God. Which is exactly what God deserves for what He has done.

In Romans 1:25, Paul writes that people “exchanged the truth of God for a lie”. What is this lie? Well, it makes its first appearance in Genesis 3:4-5, “The serpent said to the woman, “You surely will not die! For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” There are several obvious lies and half-truths in this statement; but the big one is buried. Underneath this statement is the insinuation that God is holding people down; that He is a despot who is keeping people from reaching their full potential and stopping them from exercising their will. The lie is that God does not care for us.

The birth of Jesus shines the bright light of the glory of God directly on the darkness of that lie. God does care for us. He cares for us so much that He sent His only begotten Son to be born of a woman. God the Son, left the unimaginable glory of heaven and the unique closeness He shared with the Father and the Holy Spirit, and became a human baby. He grew up subject to all the ridiculous events of life that happen to us, except He avoided sin. Then He suffered a terrible death at the hands of those He came to save.

If this does not show that God is for us, then nothing will. His love is amazing and Jesus coming to bring salvation shows what great lengths God has gone to for our benefit; for our good. He doesn’t want to hold us back; He wants us to have eternal life.

But once again, look past what’s in it for us. God’s greatness shines through in what He has done for us. His magnificence is evident because of what He was willing to do for us. His almighty power is on display in even having the ability to save us. When we accept Christ as Saviour, it is because He has imparted the faith to us by the Holy Spirit. We must glorify Him because our salvation is all from Him; we cannot claim having done anything.

This Christmas season is a time to reflect on the awesome power of God, displayed in that little baby in Bethlehem. It is time to express our gratitude; to worship Him for the all-powerful God He is; to praise Him for all that He has done and how He is in control of all the world. How fortunate we are, to be saved by Christ, to be children of Yahweh.

Prayer

LORD God, we have this special time of year set aside to celebrate the birth of Your Son, Jesus. Our King was born and we acknowledge that He still reigns at Your side in heaven and also in our hearts. We proclaim Him as King now and recognize that He will come in great power and glory to set up a physical Kingdom here on earth. We gratefully bow before Him as His subjects.

In the first advent of Christ, You displayed Your great power and might; showed that all glory and honor belong to You. Please accept our lowly offer of praise. We ask the Holy Spirit to intercede that our worship may be acceptable to You. Thank You for the imparted righteousness of Jesus that we may even come into Your presence with praise.

We thank You for that unsurpassed gift of salvation. By Jesus’ work on the cross, we have everlasting life. It is all a gracious gift from You. May glory be multiplied to You; You are holy God. You are from everlasting to everlasting.

We pray in the name of Christ Jesus our Lord

Amen