

The Birth of Jesus

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[0 : 0 0] So just for a moment or two, can we look back to Luke chapter 2, the passage we read? And just by way of introduction, can you ask you to use your imaginations a little bit?

If you can imagine these verses from verses 1 to 21, like a piece of music, if you can imagine these verses as a piece of music, then it kind of breaks up quite nicely into the rhythm of the passage. Verses 1 to 7, where we have the birth of Jesus, could be likened to a solo harpist. So it's underplayed and there's not a great amount of instrumentation.

In verses 8 to 14, with the coming of the angel and the glory of the Lord, the New Year's Day, a full orchestra is being revealed there. And then from verses 15 to verse 21, it kind of calms down a bit, more like a string quartet again. So you're moving from a minimal description to full, blooded orchestration of the divine work, and then it calms down a little bit.

The orchestra in the middle is really holding this whole section together in a great truth crescendo, if you could call it that. And we're just going to look at one or two things similarly to last week and apply it to our own lives, because we know and we recognize it's the living word of God for us. So that first section, verses 1 to 7, very briefly is the declaration of the birth of Jesus. I'm probably going to focus more on the orchestrated bit in the middle, the coming of the angel to the shepherds. But that first seven verses is really just a very ordinary, in many ways, a very ordinary birth narrative. It's very low key, it's understated. And Dr. Luke, again, as we saw last week, Dr. Luke, the one who wants to come and declare truth in his kind of medically precise way and give truth to the people, Dr. Luke, as a doctor describes all the kind of things you would expect that would be described in a birth announcement. He gives the time of the birth, the place of the birth. He gives a historical situation in the background of the birth, speaks about the family and their background, the name of the parents. He declares that it's the firstborn child. He even gives some kind of details about the clothing that the baby was wearing, the circumstances, and in the society in which Jesus was born into, it's very unremarkable really, in many ways. There's nothing amazing, and all of us, to the degree that we understand childbirth and the announcements of childbirth, can relate to this. You wouldn't read that in any way and think, oh, this is the birth of God the Son. It's just a very ordinary narrative of a baby being born, and we can relate to that. And that is typical of Luke. He takes these things that are historical and real, and he declares them. He records them. And then, as we saw last week as well, the two go side by side, this ordinary birth narrative, this solo harpist, as it were, kind of understatedly introducing the birth of Jesus, brings us to the crescendo of the middle section of the shepherds and the angels, where Luke is quite content to put the historical and the ordinary narrative of a birth side by side with the supernatural and with the breaking of heaven into earth and into our whole circumstances. He gives, therefore, into this ordinary narrative, he gives a spiritual context, and he explains who is being born, why he's being born, and why it's unique and significant that he's been born. Dr. Luke has no shame in placing the two things together, the historicity of the birth and the supernatural reality of heaven breaking into the whole scene, the glory of God being revealed and the angel speaking.

So there's a few things I want to just say quickly about this second section, this supernatural dimension, this orchestrated revelation of why Jesus is coming. And the first is this paradoxical. It's an amazing situation because what you have is two complete extremes coming together in the announcement of the angels to the shepherds. You've got the angel of the Lord coming, and you've got the glory of the Lord being revealed around him, and you've got the angelic choir singing. So you've got this divine intervention through the breaking into our society and into our world of the angelic beings, the angel of the Lord representing the highest rank of all created beings that are unseen. We don't see angels, many people in the world in which we live will not believe in them, and they'll think they're just like fairies or like Father Christmas. But we recognize the spirits,

unseen spiritual dimension breaking in and the brightness of God's glory shining in the situation. So you've got this amazing situation of heaven breaking in, and heaven and the angels come paradoxically to shepherds.

[5 : 57] So this remarkable announcement, this setting the scene of who Jesus is and why he comes as the most significant and unique event in the history of the world is given to shepherds.

Now, even in our world, even in our lives, okay, we're professionals here, you're city dwellers, and there's probably not many, there may be some children of shepherds here, but there's probably not many shepherds here. But even in our context, shepherds, being a shepherd is a fairly noble profession. It's regarded with some respect here in Scotland, I can say that, as my brother-in-law and father-in-law were both shepherds. But generally you would all agree that a shepherd was a respectful profession to be in, and as Christians we've got a respect for shepherds because of the biblical imagery of shepherding and the Lord's my shepherd and all that. But in the society in which Jesus was born into, shepherds were not a respected profession. They were similar to, in many ways, to the tax collectors and the prostitutes of Jesus' day in terms of social standing. They were second class, they were untrustworthy, their word wouldn't be taken in court, they had no civil rights, and they were despised, a bit like, I don't know what you're saying, but in culture and society, travellers, because they would always be on the move, they wouldn't be fixed in any one place, they didn't put their roots down, they would be working in different parts of the country, and they were genuinely despised in the society's terms. Only Luke mentions them in the New Testament. But there's a very powerful message that God is giving to us when he breaks in from heaven with the announcement of the birth of Jesus and gives it to shepherds.

This great announcement, this significant announcement with the glory of God being revealed is not given to in the decree in the days of Caesar Augustus, it's not given to Caesar Augustus who was reputed to be a god in his day, it wasn't given to Parliament or to the royal palace, not to the powerful and important, it was given to shepherds, and there's a spiritual significance there. And I don't think we get that, you know, with all the sentiment of him, carols and everything about shepherds at night and, you know, nativity scenes and all that kind of thing, we probably don't get the significance of what Jesus is saying. To try and parallel that, and it's not a very good parallel, but it would be like today the Queen's coronation or the next coronation of the next king, whoever it will be, being held in a brothel. That's what it would do, that's a kind of similarity, that's the shock factor that the people would have got when the announcement of the Messiah was given to the shepherds, like the Queen's coronation being held in a brothel. And there's a scandal, and there's a signal within that message that Jesus, that the Bible is bringing to us, that he is turning convention in its head, and that our standards of significance and importance and morality and goodness are not his, and they don't cut it with God. Caesar Augustus saying is God, the important Roman leaders or the Jewish religious leaders of the day,

God's not impressed with that, and God takes his message to the outcasts and the marginalized.

That's the message from the beginning of Jesus coming, it's the message of all the gospels, that Jesus spends his time with the uneducated, with the lowly, with the marginalized, with the outcasts, because he is saying something significant. He's saying, I want you to see, and I want everyone to see, that I have come to people who are in need, and people who need a redeemer. Mark chapter 2 in verse 17, if we have that for the screen, if it's on the screen, and when Jesus heard it, he said to them, those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick, I came not to call them righteous, but sinners, and the glory of God being revealed through the angels to the shepherds was exactly an announcement of that. It's exactly an announcement that that is who Jesus come to save. He says, I've not come to save people who think they don't need a Savior. It's not that they don't need a Savior, but they think they don't need a Savior. I've come to those who will recognize their need, and I spend my time with those who are already socially outcast, because they are beginning to see their need. And that is a huge lesson, I think that's a huge lesson for us. It's a huge lesson for us not to be complacent, not to be self-righteous, not to be judgmental, and not to be careless about our spiritual condition. Yeah, it's okay, I'm fine. I'm not a bad guy, a bad person. I'll treat Jesus like that fourth emergency service now and again, but there's no sense of daily rescue and need from this great Redeemer who promises to be with us every step of the way. So, it's at that level, it's paradoxical, but it's also informative, this orchestrated middle section. So, the angel brings information about who this baby who is born. There was, I don't know, hundreds of babies were born at the same time as Jesus, all through the world, but this particular birth is

special, and the angel brings information about why it's special, and it's grounded in the Old Testament, which again is significant for us. It's not a random birth, it's not, oh, I'm surprising you all. This could never have, this is grounded in the Old Testament and in the plan and purpose of God, and we've seen that all through, haven't we? So, he's going to be born, we're told, in the King's town in verse 11, we've found to you this day is born in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord, and we know that Mary and Joseph had moved to Bethlehem. Now, in Micah chapter 5 and verse 2, we have that prophesied, but you Bethlehem epithera, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me, one who is to be ruler of Israel, whose coming forth is from old, from ancient days. This Old Testament declaration that the Savior would come from Bethlehem, the city of David, it's the city where David ironically was the shepherd king, and the people had seemed to forgotten that about the whole concept of shepherding. It's where he was crowned, and those of you who are part of the congregation and have been for a little while may remember our study in Ruth, where Naomi left Bethlehem, which was the house of bread, that's what it means, Bethlehem, the house of bread, which symbolized the blessing of being God's covenant people, but it was in a time of famine. But they left the place where God promised to be if they would turn back to him, and they went to another place. And so it has whole of Old Testament significance, as the place where the Messiah would come from, who would at one point in his ministry declare himself to be the bread of life. And that's all fitting into the picture that is being spoken of here, and later on in Micah it speaks of him as the shepherd of the flock.

[14:07] So it's born in the King's town, and earlier we're told that Luke tells us that Jesus would be the firstborn. And again, I think that's significant. It's significant biblically, this whole term that's given to Jesus, the baby being the firstborn. There's an interesting question asked, I don't think I put this on the screen, Micah 6, verse 7, I don't think so, where Micah the prophet asks, shall I give my firstborn for the sin of my soul?

It's that question, who would do that? Who would ever give their most beloved child for the sin of their soul? It's unthinkable, it's kind of, it was an unthinkable statement, he couldn't possibly do that. But here the firstborn is the child, as it were, the incarnate child of God, the Son of God. And it is, speaks about his birth, but it speaks more about his designation, the firstborn in Scripture was the ruler often, was the preeminent one, who would receive the inheritance of people. And that is significant in the life of Jesus, also in Romans 8:29, that phrase is used of Jesus, for those whom he foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. So that sense in which even in his resurrection, on the Sunday morning, first day of the week, the resurrection speaks of him being the fruit of the salvation, the firstborn, the creator who is both dead and alive, and the fruit of the salvation. And then in Colossians 1:15, similarly, it speaks of Jesus as being the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation, giving him this great sense of preeminence and significance, and he comes as the firstborn to bring peace in a war and in our hearts. Christ, who is the one who brings peace, I'm going to say a little bit more briefly about that at the end. But it's informative, and we're told he's the firstborn, and we also know he's one that's born with names and with titles. Verse 11, he's called the Saviour, the deliverer, the rescuer. Significant, that's important for us today, is called the Christ, the anointed one, the chosen one, the Messiah. That name just links back into every book of the Old Testament. It speaks of the coming of the Saviour, the Messiah, the promised one, the gift of God, right from Genesis 3 and the seed of the woman, one who's set apart, the one, the one, the only one. You know, it's not like there's Jesus and there's Buddha and there's Muhammad, and there's a whole lot of different ones that you could just take your pick and mix, depending on your culture and the society and where you're from.

The claim, the exclusive claim, a deliberately exclusive unique claim of the Messiah being God's only one. He was the only one in the mind of the divine, the all-knowing one. He says, there's no alternative, there isn't another way. It doesn't, it's not just about where we're born and what we happen to have opened in our lives in terms of religious books. He said, this is the one, this is the Redeemer, this, and heaven breaks into the situation to say that. And he says, he's Lord, not only is he Messiah and the Saviour, he's like an astonishing claim that he is Lord, Christ the Lord. It's not merely human term of respect and esteem. This baby is being confessed as one who is the full deity of God, that he is the Lord. It's a divine title, incomparable. Glance back to the solo harp section. Glance back to it. This ordinary birth, he is the Lord. He's declared as God in the flesh, you know. You need to soak that in. We need to soak that in and you, you know, what kind of God

would do this? What kind of God would do this? You accuse Him of being distant, of being disinterested in your life. And here we have a picture of the God who is conceived in the womb of Mary and is born into poverty, a stricken child of ostracized, beggarly poor parents revealed to nobody but to disinterested shepherds. The greatest announcement ever that God chooses to give is given in this remarkably that this is God who comes in and it's good for us to be reminded of that afresh.

So the last thing I want to say this morning is that it's not only informative and paradoxical but I'm moving out of the passage for this but it's recorded for our certainty. Okay, so this birth narrative that we receive and often hear and you maybe think you're tired of hearing it and you know it all and maybe we should preach about the birth of Jesus in June. I think that would be better sometimes. Just to take away the familiarity of doing it in December. Okay, maybe not. It's just an idea. It's recorded for our certainty.

[19:53] Luke chapter 1 and verse 3 it says, It seemed good to me, this is Luke giving the reason for his writing of the book. It seemed good to me having followed all these things closely from time past to write an orderly account most excellent theophilus that you may have certainty concerning the things you've been taught. So Luke's account, you know the narrative of the nativity is given for us to have certainty about what has been seen by the eyewitnesses and what is being declared to the people he's writing to as the gospel. It's both historical and historically sound but also miraculous and divine in its message. Luke has no problem with that and it's still speaking to us. So it's speaking to us I think about a couple of things. The first is peace. I didn't mention that briefly. And this week I came into this study. I usually have a daily reading book that I have that I read at home. It's actually surprise, surprise, Tim Keller. And it's going through the Psalms. It's a great book going through the Psalms. That's the one I normally read in the morning but I didn't have it with me. I came into the church and I've got a number of different daily reading books just in my shelves beside my office. And I took one of them and it was just an old daily reading book written by a Dutch pastor. And it happened to be that the day I was preparing the sermon and I was looking at this aspect of peace. And the message from that day was from Isaiah 52 which spoke about how beautiful the mountains of Him who brings good news, good tidings.

And then this Dutch pastor explained a little bit about peace from his context. And he said, if you want to know again what the good news is, think back to the situation in the Netherlands in the year 1945. It was spring after the most fearful winter Europe had ever known.

Sons were murdered, fathers were powerless, daughters were insecure and mothers could no longer give daily food to their children. People died of starvation and they cried to God under the heel of the Nazi oppressor. They met in churches and in the long dark nights there was no electricity. They prayed fervently for freedom, for help, for a way out. On the evening of May the 4th a rumor went through the country. It was an electrifying rumor and it went faster than a prairie fire. It's over! The war is over! Peace! Not one healthy person stayed in his chair. Crowds went out into the dark streets. Someone started to sing a song of liberty and they were all filled with joy. This comes closest, he says, to what happened at Christmas. It was in that night that the heavens were opened and a voice said, it's over! It's all over! Now the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of God.

And we've lost sight of that declaration of peace because we are living as it were tangibly, in many ways, in peaceful days. But the peace of God is a spiritual peace and it's a vital peace for us. Living in the knowledge that death has been defeated for everyone who puts their faith in Jesus Christ. And that we are made right with God through the sacrifice, death and resurrection of our Savior because He loves us and because there's no other way.

So it's peace. And it's also, as we're told, the good news of great joy. And we know these words, don't we? And the experience of the believer, and I mentioned this last week, I guess, whatever happens in our lives, whatever good things we experience are otherwise. And this, for this time of year, is a great time of joy. But as I said in prayer, remember it's not for a lot of people. Let's not just presume it's a great time of happiness and peace for everyone. Remember that in many families, not only is there loss, but there's tension to come together this time of year. Many families are not happy families and the coming together brings huge tensions and difficulties. Remember that. But this we have is good news of great joy, great personal news that we have and that we share. That's why I think in application of this, conversions, people coming to faith in Jesus Christ is the life blood of our churches. It's why testimonies matter so much and why we're struggling as a church when

we don't hear testimonies and when people aren't being brought to Christ and when there's just a level kind of everyone going on the same way. It's a great and encouraging thing to see God still working in people's lives and transforming them. And you can gauge your understanding of the message of the gospel by how much you're thrilled when you hear about someone coming to faith, especially someone you know. It should be the one thing that just breaks your heart in the best way, that just breaks your heart with joy because it's the most significant and the realest, greatest reality in their lives. And it's something that we should rejoice in. And of course, in terms of the certainty of this great message being one which is good news and one of peace is that that repeated refrain from the angel of the Lord says, fear not, don't be afraid. And I repeat that. We need to grasp that in our lives. It's a great word, isn't it, to end the year and start the new year with a world that's really upside down and could instill within us a great sense of fear about the future of the world and the future of our nation and the future of our relationships and the future of society and whatever, but maybe at a much more personal level you've received bad news or you're struggling with difficulties in one way or another. He says in Christ, he says fear not, even in your fragility, whatever it might be, fear not, being your church life or your home life, as leaders we're fearful for how to progress and we do things in God's way and God's will. Fear not with your lack of faith, failure and doubt. Fear not, it's really good news. Trust in Him. That's what pleases

[26 : 43] Him, that simple trust that we, we don't need to know all the answers, but we entrust ourselves to the one who does, even if he chooses not to reveal these answers to us, but we trust him. Why? Because he's good and because he's already shown that as God, he came and lay in a stinking, smelly manger and lived in anonymity and was rejected in his public life and was abandoned by his friends and was forsaken by his God so that we might live. That's why we needn't fear. Amen. Let's bow our heads briefly in prayer.

Father God, we thank you for your great truth and we thank you that when often we don't feel your grip of grace, it remains on us as believers and you keep us from wandering and when we do wander, you leave the 99 that seem to be doing okay and you come after us.

You love returning the wandering sheep to the fold. You look out for the prodigal child who is wild and unrepentant until they see their emptiness without you and Lord give us that humility of heart and that strength and courage to face up to the spiritual realities that sometimes we run away from and help us to hold on to you as this great God, yet a brother who understands us and who has gone before us and who has died in our place. We rejoice in the good news of the gospel today. It's great good news of great joy and may we respond in faith and in trust for Jesus' sake. Amen.