

Birth of Jesus

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- [0 : 00] Now like us today to turn back together to Luke chapter 2 and verses 1 to 20 where we continue looking at these early accounts of Jesus' life as narrated to us by Dr. Luke.
- And this is a great passage, it's quite a short passage, very well known, passage to us, but again the focus of the passage as we've seen already, even in these early accounts, is very much on Jesus Christ himself.
- And I'd like to, as it were, kind of split this passage into three sections and ask you to use your imagination just for a moment and imagine them in a kind of musical context just to get the kind of flavour and idea of the way that Luke is presenting the truth here.
- And maybe if you took verses 1 to 7 of this chapter which just narrates the birth itself in very plain ways, it would be maybe like a kind of, it would be like a solo harpist, you know, very quiet, very gentle, very understated.
- But then you come to the second section from verses 8 to verse 15 where the angels explode onto the scene and the whole of heaven opens up and it's like there's a whole orchestra of noise.
- [1 : 28] So that the whole atmosphere and everything about the picture changes from being very gentle and quiet to being explosive and loud and amazing as heaven breaks into earth and speaks very clearly to the shepherds.
- And then the last section in chapter 2 is from verse 15 to the end where they were told the angels have got, the angels go and then there's all the shepherds and they go to visit Mary and maybe it's a bit more like a string quartet.
- It doesn't quite go back to the mellowness of the soloist but it definitely comes down a notch again.
- So when you're looking at the passage you're seeing Luke presenting this truth and bringing it up into a median crescendo in the middle and then breaking us down gently again because he wants us to focus on the spiritual message of what is happening and that comes in that middle crescendo section where the whole orchestra is playing and where God is telling us what is happening and I'd like us to look at that today.
- I know it's a very well known passage to us. I just pray and hope by God's spirit that he will take his truth and apply it in a fresh way to us again today because if we see verses 1 to 7 we see clearly, don't we, a very ordinary birth narrative.
- [3 : 05] This is Dr. Luke, he's a medical doctor, he's well known about these procedures and he gives all the kind of facts that you would expect a doctor to give but in an ordinary understated way.
- All the usual markers are there as we have recorded the birth of Jesus. There's nothing supernatural, nothing spectacular, nothing out of the ordinary about this account in verses 1 to 7.
- It is placed in time as a good doctor would. Birth of the baby, when is it? Well, it's given in a wider context in the days of Caesar Augustus.

The place is given, the explanation of why they've moved from Nazareth to Bethlehem is given so we know the place. The genealogy is mentioned, the family of connections, the background, they moved to that area because Joseph was of the line of David.

We have that truth made clear. We have all the circumstances that brings us to this account. We have the parents mentioned, an important part in a birth story, always the parents are mentioned.

[4 : 19] We have the fact that he is a first born child, recorded for us as well. This is a first born, recorded child. The clothes that he was wearing is mentioned, do you see what we gave him to wear?

Even the fact of his surroundings where he was laid, the poverty stricken nature of his birth that it wasn't in spectacular circumstances that he was born.

Very unremarkable. Now anyone taking that story could read and would know and would understand that this is not an ordinary account of the birth of a baby that Mary who was pledged to be married was expecting a child.

She's just expecting a child. This is grounded in reality, in ordinary everyday experiences and there is nothing spiritual about this account.

Nothing. There's nothing spiritual about it whatsoever. It is a recording of the facts of the birth of a boy.

[5 : 22] Nobody would come to salvation by reading this account on its own. Impossible if it wasn't followed up by God's interpretation.

Because Luke is giving an ordinary account of a birth to ground this situation in reality. Now we know it's not an ordinary birth but we need God to interpret that for us.

The shepherds needed God to interpret that. Mary needed God to interpret that. Joseph needed God to send messengers from heaven to interpret these facts to us.

We need God to interpret the cross. We need God to interpret the Holy Spirit in our lives. We need God to make clear to us what we can't know ourselves because we're spiritually blind and lost and without hope.

We need God to open our eyes. And so this ordinary account is brought to life spiritually by the orchestra of heaven coming and explaining what was happening.

[6 : 32] And there's a real wow factor to this section where this event is explained spiritually because they're not just facts.

And we mustn't leave the Bible as just facts. We must recognize that these facts need to be explained and explored and interpreted by the living God to us so that Luke, this medical professional who deals with facts and who wants to give a well-reasoned, documented, well-thought-out account of the life of Jesus again has no shame in speaking immediately about angels and about heaven opening up and about the Holy Spirit and about God and about the Savior.

So we have in verses 8 to 14 the supernatural, the spiritual explanation of an ordinary birth or at least what appears to be an ordinary birth.

And there's several things about this that we look to apply and see God speaking to us from because we clearly are shown by God how unconventional He is in terms of what He is doing and in terms of human expectation.

It's unconventional. We have here an ordinary birth and yet heaven breaks in in this most remarkable way where there is an angelic messenger from God appearing to the shepherds and the glory of the Lord shines around them in such a way that they are terrified by what they experience.

[8 : 24] And it's unconventional because this angelic army that comes singing God's praises come with a message of peace. That is unconventional by any standard that an army comes with a message of peace and yet that is what they are doing.

And they come to speak about the birth of a child not far away from the shepherds. There's an unconventional way in which God breaks into the ordinary experience of every person with this message as He breathes life into the facts of the birth of Jesus.

And it's unconventional too. I'm not going to say much about this because I mentioned it when we looked at it before the end of the year. The shepherds are main stage here.

But there's a beautiful irony in this section that Caesar Augustus is kind of used as a timepiece. That's all. It's only just timing the birth of Jesus and he's almost mentioned as an aside to that, to base it and ground it historically.

He was God, He was a God to everyone around Him. He was a God to their own people. He was to be worshipped. He was the most powerful man in the world and yet He's being bypassed in this event.

[9 : 44] It's not going near Him. The angels don't give the message of this King of Kings to Him. They give the message to shepherds and these despised people, a group of people that weren't respected by the Jews, let alone by the Romans and yet they're the ones to whom this message is given.

Why is that the case? Why does God bring that message to the angels? Well, simply one of the reasons I think because they're near. I think there's anything necessarily deep and spiritual about it at one level.

It just happened to be there. They're nearby. They're in the open air and the angels are coming in the open air to bring this message. I think it's more than that.

I think God likes, and I speak reverently, God likes shepherds. Moses was a shepherd. David was a shepherd. Jesus was pleased to take that image of shepherding Himself for His people.

God likes shepherds, even though they're despised by everyone around them. Jews also because they were mobile, they were on the move a lot.

[10 : 58] They would spread the word quickly, just as the word in New Testament times in Acts was spread quickly with the diaspora and as the Jews were spread throughout the known world.

But the shepherds have this important role to play as the angels speak to them. So it's unconventional, the story at that level.

But it's also tremendously informative. The angels bring an informative message based on grounded in the Old Testament.

So the message from heaven comes, but it comes via the Old Testament. So the angels are knowledgeable about this, knowledgeable about the Messiah, knowledgeable about some of what we've been singing about and some of the prophetic message of Jesus coming.

And they are bringing, grounding that in the Old Testament. And we're reminded that they say that the Savior is to be born in the town of the Messiah, born in the King's town, born in Bethlehem in Micah chapter 5 and in verse 2, but you Bethlehem mephathra, 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 old, from ancient times are from eternity.

[12 : 27] And so we have that Old Testament picture of the birth of Jesus coming today in the town of David, a Savior is born.

So he's born in the King's town and they want that known and they want the angels to know that, that this King from heaven is a descendant of David.

And that passage in Micah also makes reference to the fact that this great King, this great ruler will be a shepherd of his people, interestingly. He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord is God.

So I have the link with the shepherd, even in that Old Testament passage from Micah, that would relate to the shepherds if they knew their Old Testament and relate to us as we look back and see that this birth is no ordinary birth, but is the birth of the expected one.

And that the move from Nazareth to Bethlehem is not simply because of the senses that this Roman emperor wants to meet out on his people, but it is part of the sovereign purposes of God as they are worked out and bringing Christ the Son of God to be born in Bethlehem.

[13 : 46] And we're told that this is Jesus Christ and he is the firstborn, the one who is to be God's redeemer.

That designation firstborn is significant. Again, it links with Micah, where Micah speaks of the preeminent rule of this Lord and God.

And that firstborn designation is also one that doesn't speak of Jesus being created as it were never having existed before.

It speaks primarily of His preeminence, of the preeminence of His being and of His role as Savior Romans 8.29 reminds us as the Creator God, Colossians 1.15 reminds us He is the firstborn and He is the one who is to be the Savior.

The Savior has been born to you and Luke records Him as the firstborn and He is the one of course with a title, the title Savior. So early on, even as He is born, the angels, the message from heaven is that Jesus comes as a deliverer, He comes as a rescuer, He comes to bring peace, He comes to bring peace to His people and that includes us as we put our trust in Jesus Christ.

[15 : 22] That is the gift that Jesus is bringing. He is bringing God's peace to people and the title Savior is a recognition of that and would have been known and recognized as such.

A title and also names. He is Christ, we are told. He is the Lord. Today in the town of David, Savior has been born to you, verse 11, He is Christ, the Lord.

Christ the Anointed One, Christ meaning the Messiah. Again Christ the Chosen One, Christ the Only One. Again it points us to beyond this ordinary birth, but that this birth is the breaking in to our world of the Savior that God Himself has anointed, has recognized as the only Savior.

So we don't come today worshiping one among many, one nice way to become a believer, one different way to become a believer.

We recognize Him as the Messiah, the anointed one, the only one, the Savior, the way, the truth and the life, the door, the key, the entry, the absolute unique way to heaven, to God and to peace.

[16 : 48] He has a title and He is the One who is chosen and He is Lord, an astonishing acknowledgement of His deity.

Not only did Elizabeth recognize that, if we looked in the last chapter and Mary in her great song, but also it is confirmed from the angels from heaven that He is the Lord who is coming.

This is God. So we have the soul harpist giving a gentle rendition of an ordinary birth that looks like an undramatic event and yet we have then with the backup of heaven, just with the glory of the orchestra of heaven reminding us of who Jesus is, what the background to this birth is, what the expectation to this birth is, what the Savior that comes from this birth is.

So there is tremendously informative and there is again this great bedding of New Testament truth in Old Testament reality. You can't really do one without the other.

They are both so important to us because the New Testament so beautifully grounds and prepares and breaks up the ground for us to receive Jesus and to know and understand who He is.

[18 : 19] So the angels come and God sends them in a way that is unconventional but is informative and also is evidence. They bring with them evidence of what they are saying or they want to provide a sign that is evidence in verse 12.

They say, this is a sign to you. You will find a baby wrapped in clothes and lying in a manger. That was a sign for them, for the shepherds, that what was being said from heaven, it wasn't just a dream, it wasn't just something that they hallucinated about, it was real.

And you know, Luke again is important on the signs. He is important on the evidence and so they say, Luke, you will find a sign that all we are saying is true, you will find a baby wrapped in clothes, lying in a manger.

They may have gone into Bethlehem and there may have been other babies but they wouldn't have been wrapped in a certain way nor would they have been in a manger. That was to be the sign for them that what was being said from heaven was true.

And if you just look, jump onto verse 20, we find that Luke backs that up because it is important to him, the shepherds returning, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had seen and heard, which were just as they had been told.

[19 : 40] And it was important to Luke that the evidence was there, that what was being said was true, because he wants eyewitnesses accounts that have been carefully investigated and an orderly account written down.

And so he backs up these things because they are important to him. So the birth of Jesus is evidenced in this miraculous way and it's informative and it's unusual and it is there for us as we rejoice in the incarnation of Jesus.

Now tonight I want to spend more time on that, particularly with regard to the Trinity. And it truly is remarkable as we think of who Jesus is, God in the flesh, fully God, truly man, one person, marvellous truth that should bring us to adoration and worship.

But as we close by applying this truth which you may feel is very far away from you and irrelevant to you or just so well known to you that it can't do anything for you spiritually, what is it that we take from a passage like this?

Well we need to remind ourselves God continues to speak even through a passage that's well worn as it were like this to us.

[21 : 13] There's always His message, it is always His good news and this good news that the angels give is for all the people. Not simply a message for a few random shepherds on a Galilean hillside a long time ago.

But there is one very big question which I know many of you here will already have come to terms with but some of you might not have and in a sense it's the elephant in the room in this passage.

You can't miss it really but very often sometimes we do but the question is do you know God's peace because the angels come to speak about the peace that Jesus Christ has come to offer through His life and death and resurrection through His atoning work on the cross.

He came to bring peace. Do you know that peace? So you know whatever else we know about the story of creation of the incarnation of the birth of Jesus.

Do we know this peace of God in our hearts? What is that peace of God that you have in your heart? Can it be biblically described and understood and experienced?

[22 : 30] Is it some kind of vague thing that isn't really from God at all? The peace of God. We're reminded that every single living human being needs that peace.

That is why this was such a unique sending. It was a one-off sending. It never happened again and it wasn't just for Jewish people or local people.

It was for the whole world at all times. We whether we truly understand that or not without Christ are in a spiritual war.

A war with God and not at peace in our hearts. Hell bound. That is the truth. We might not feel like that.

We might feel the nicest, best, most model upright people there are. But without the peace of God through Christ in our hearts, hell bound at war with God.

[23 : 31] And it's a terrifying reality. And the response may be, well I simply don't believe that. And I want to ignore that fact. And I feel good about myself.

I don't feel these things that you speak about. Evidence of God's Word. The facts laid out by Dr. Luke.

The reasoned, well-balanced argument of this Gospel. The evidence of your heart, of your death, of your animosity to God.

Evidence of dis-peace with Him. I don't need that. I don't want that. I don't believe that. Evidence of that dis-peace.

And God reminding us that only He can give you that peace. It's a great offer. We don't need to jump through hoops. We don't need to have been church members or church adherents or church attenders for so many years.

[24 : 37] It is an offer that He offers freely, exclusively, recognizing our helplessness to accept, or our helplessness to make peace with God in our own terms.

It's very humbling. Because every one of us as Christians have either literally or symbolically or spiritually had to fall in our knees and say, Lord, I need you.

I need your salvation and I need your peace. There's a guilt. There's an unhappiness. There's a pride. There's a stubbornness. There's an arrogance. There's an arrogance. There's a blindness.

And I can't deal with it. I can't even see what you're saying. I need you. And I need your peace and I need your salvation. That is the point of coming to Christ, isn't it?

That point of recognition of need. And God says that His message is good news. The gospel is good news. It is good news. It's brilliant news.

[25 : 39] I was hearing this week. I can't remember in what context. But I remember reading it before in a book by a pastor who had said that he was out witnessing speaking to someone about the gospel.

It was actually a prostitute he was speaking to about the gospel and he was inviting her to church. He said he should come to church to hear about the peace of the gospel of Christ. And she said, why?

Why would I ever come to church? I feel bad enough about myself as it is. Why would I ever come to church to be made to feel worse about myself?

You know, that was her image. Wasn't good news for her, the gospel, or her perception of the gospel and God's people. Wasn't good news. It was that she would come to church and be harangued and be told how bad she was and how miserable she was.

She was well aware of. She needed to know the good news. Of course we recognise that there's victory, but there can only be victory in a battle.

[26 : 43] We recognise it's good news, but only with the precursor of our own need and the bad news of that. We know that we struggle in the present, but only because we have a future in Christ.

But what impression do we give as individuals and as a congregation of the good news of the gospel? We invited someone who said, there's no chance we're going to that place to be made to feel worse.

What kind of preaching do I have? What kind of message do we give? What kind of evidence do we share that we know the peace of God in our hearts?

Are we any different from anyone else? Do we show and know and reveal and share this glorious good news of peace? This impression that it's not about outward behaviour ultimately, although the peace of God will transform us.

It is about this great recognition of forgiveness and the hope that Jesus brings. So we have that great elephant in the room. Do you know God's peace?

[27 : 51] You must ask that, and I must ask that in our lives. But also we see the important responses that are given again and again and again in this passage.

There's a lot of responses to God through the angelic messengers breaking in the glory of God being revealed. And we see there's different responses here in this passage, don't we?

We see the shepherds are those who are convinced, verse 17, they've seen them, they've spread the word concerning what they've been told about this child. They were convinced by what they'd seen and they spread the word.

And those to whom they spread the word were amazed by what they saw. Mary on the other hand treasured these words up in her heart and pondered them seriously and deeply.

And then again the shepherds were told, praised God, glorifying and praising God for all that they had seen and what they'd been told. So there's a variety, isn't there, of responses there to God, God breaking into that seemingly ordinary birth with the message, with the weight of the whole Old Testament behind that message and behind the birth of Jesus.

[29 : 15] Are we convinced? Are we convinced of the gospel message that we profess to believe? Is it important to us so much so that like the shepherds we will share it?

Are people amazed when they hear of the Savior who has transformed our lives? When we look at God's word, when we sing God's word, when we read God's word in our own heart and our own homes, do we treasure that in our hearts?

Do we ponder these things, these truths of Jesus, meditate on them, think about them? What it means, how it affects our lives?

Do we glorify and praise God as He breaks into our experience and as He touches us with His grace and as He answers our prayers and as He reveals Himself through the Holy Spirit in our hearts?

And that glorifying, of course, simply really just means obedience. We glorify God by obeying Him and that is a great response to His breaking into our experience.

[30 : 32] It might not be quite as orchestrated as it was here in a sense. It might not be so dramatic the breaking in of God, but each one of us who are Christs have had God breaking into our ordinary life in a most remarkable way.

Is that our experience? When we share to a greater or lesser degree, I'm sure, with some of these responses, look into your heart, as I look in, I must look into mine.

Do we share that glorifying, worshipful, convincing, sharing, pondering response to God from His word and from His truth as we experience it?

Because if we can't in any way, can we claim to be spiritual at all? Can we? Has God broken in?

Is it that we need a degree of repentance and prayer? A solemn and serious recognition that, sorry, that's simply not my experience.

[31 : 40] I don't know anything like that. And it's good for us as a congregation, I hope, to look for these responses in an ongoing way.

And really, it's why more than anything, I wanted to stress, and just in that handout, the importance of praying together, as well as praying on our own.

It's great encouragement to pray on our own, great encouragement, great encouragement to worship on our own, but it ought to be, and it should be, I hope, and we look for it. One of us looked for it to be a great encouragement together.

Scotland fan came in this room just now, the tartan scarf on, and all the gear, a coat, and everything else. You know, he'd probably feel a bit of a place, and he wouldn't maybe sing too dramatically and loud, flowery Scotland and things like that.

And it wouldn't really be that noticed, maybe. Well, maybe he would. But he maybe wouldn't feel particularly encouraged or comfortable.

[32 : 42] But if this church was filled with 600 of the tartan army, why, he would really be singing his heart out, and he'd be singing with great power and with great encouragement, and just having everyone else around this place be filled with our Scotland supporters, and it would make a difference.

Not just being solitary in his own feeling out of place. Now, we worship the King of Kings. He's great, yes. We can do it on our own, of course we can. We do, and we should, and we must.

But there ought to be for us a great encouragement. It's fantastic to see the church, at least downstairs, get our step now to make it full upstairs, then we'll split up and start other churches.

But it is being encouraged together, and worship together, and be built up together by that, and be enthused together, and respond together in the way that we see the biblical responses here of glorifying and worshiping and meditating and spreading the word, and sharing the gospel message.

May we look for these responses, not just individually, but also corporately. See ourselves as a body, and how we reflect Jesus together, as well as independently.

[34 : 05] And may we worship God, and seek His Holy Spirit, and as we come together to pray, I think it's certainly, in my part, a recognition of that we are a spiritual organization, and that Christ is our head, and we need Him.

We need Him together. We pray together. We plead together, if we are a spiritual organism together, which we are through the Holy Spirit.

We need Him together, as well as apart. So we pray together in that recognition that it's not here just about being together, but it's about God in our midst, and we need to cry out in dependence for Him, and show the world that we are a people who need God, and who are dependent on God.

Not just that we know and say that in our heads, easy, peasy. We can all say that, oh yeah, we need God. But that we show it in our lives, in our commitment to this God, who is the head of our church.

And we do look forward to looking more in a kind of theological way, in a sense, a much more specifically theological way, as opposed to the narrative way we've looked at it this morning, at the Trinity and the Incarnation, and what that means for us.

[35 : 28] Let us bow our heads in prayer. For God, we ask that we would understand by your grace the mystery of God, the Son, becoming flesh as we seek to look at that tonight, give us wisdom and humility, and grace to do so, and give us expectation to be amazed at our Savior.

And the more we look into Him, the more we study Him, the more we know Him by grace, the more we cry out for forgiveness for the stupidity and ignorance of our hearts, the more we are amazed at His patience, His grace, His dimensions that are simply God and how remarkable they are.

We pray that you would bless us, help us to take your word and apply it in our lives and hearts, and be particularly near to those today who are struggling with real difficulties, with bad, bad human situations around them, with loved ones who are seriously ill, with really difficult personal health issues, with horrible work situations, or whatever it might be, Lord, we pray that you and your grace and your truth would break into their lives and reveal your peace and your comfort and your closeness.

Amen.