

Incarnation!

Good News of Great Joy Part 4

Luke 2:1-20

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Summary: As the story of Jesus' birth unfolds, Luke's gospel reveals some surprising men who were given the divine task to be the bearers of the first gospel, the first good news. How were a bunch of lowly shepherds chosen to herald the coming of the Messiah? Join Stephen and explore the announcement of Jesus' birth!

It didn't take very long for the news to literally reach around the known world, that a baby boy was born — a very special baby.

He was heralded as the one who would bring peace to the world. One document that survived for more than 2,000 years announced he was the savior of mankind, and I quote, "his birth marked the beginning of all good tidings for the world."

Michael Grant, *The Twelve Caesars* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1975), p. 65

The problem is, they weren't talking about the birthday of Jesus, they were celebrating the birthday and the reign of Caesar Gaius Octavius, later named Caesar Augustus — which means supreme or divine ruler.

Augustus had ascended to the seat of power after his adoptive father, Julius Caesar, was assassinated. Augustus took

over a rather disorganized association of competing regions and over the next 45 years, he forged it into the Roman Empire that we think of today.

He built magnificent buildings and temples, paved roadway systems, built aqueducts, instituted the pax romana — the peace of Rome, and administrated financial, legal and religious reforms.

The month of August would be named in his honor.

Bruce B. Barton, *Life Application Bible: Luke* (Tyndale, 1997), p. 37

Several years before the birth of Christ, Halley's Comet blazed across the night sky, and Caesar Augustus proclaimed that it was the spirit of his adopted father, Julius Caesar, ascending into heaven as one of the gods.

Adapted from Charles R. Swindoll, *Insights on Luke* (Zondervan, 2012), p. 61

The citizens eagerly believed him and Augustus then minted coins with Julius Caesar's likeness on one side, and his own likeness on the other with the words, "Caesar, Son of a God".

Grant, p. 55

Caesar Augustus looked like and lived like and ruled like what you would expect the son of a god to look like and live like and rule like — certainly more than the one we know today as the only Son of God.



How does the humble arrival and upbringing of Jesus affect the story of the New Testament? What would be different if Jesus had been born into royal splendor and glory, like Caesar was?

And Luke seems to be highlighting this distinction as he begins the narrative of the birth of Jesus, 1500 miles away from Rome, on the other side of the Mediterranean Sea.

It's as if Luke is highlighting, "Listen, if you think what was *really* happening in the world at this time was whatever Caesar Augustus was doing or decreeing, you missed it by 1500 miles.

Let me invite you to open your Bible to Luke's Gospel; let's rejoin our study through this Gospel account; we're now at chapter 2 and verse 1:

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria.

Luke 2:1-2

As if to say, as far as the world was concerned, these guys are the ones in charge nationally, in Rome and regionally, in Syria. These guys are the movers and shakers of power; they are calling the shots in everyone's life.

But of all the decrees that Caesar Augustus sent out, of all the mandates he announced, of all the speeches he delivered, and of all the buildings he dedicated, none of them are mentioned — except this one decree.

Adapted from John MacArthur, [Luke: Volume 1](#) (Moody Publishers, 2009), p. 144

And that's because Luke is telling us who really happens to be in charge.

A decree went out from Caesar Augustus — yes, but what's God really doing here?

You see, you have a young couple expecting a baby, living in Nazareth. They're not where they will need to be in order to fulfill the prophecy of Micah delivered 800 years earlier that *the ruler of Israel — the Messiah — will be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2)*.

How do you get this couple from Nazareth to Bethlehem — 90 miles away — at the worst possible time in their lives?

God ordains the means; He controls the hearts of kings; they seem to be in control, but only indirectly. God is controlling history. History is His story.

And we're given here an inside peek at how God works behind the scenes. God moves the heart of Caesar to make him hungry for some more tax revenue.

Caesar wakes up with a bright idea — “I think I'll issue a world-wide tax!” And all 600 Roman senators evidently agreed, and probably wholeheartedly, because that's what rulers and senators do — they tax people.

But for Joseph and Mary, this was the worst of times; and for the Jewish nation who hated Roman taxation, this would have been the talk of the town — where was God in all of this?

Maybe you have felt like that these days; maybe your life has been changed in recent months; maybe you feel like your life has been bounced around like a pin ball and it's outside your control. You have adapted from mandate to the next mandate; responded to one confusing report and then the next.

Maybe you've asked the question, “where is God in all of this?”

We may not have all the answers, but we do know God is at work. The Psalmist said in *Psalms 121 verse 4*, *Our God never slumbers or sleeps.*

You know what that means? That means you *can*. You can go to sleep — at night — I don't mean now!

Beloved, don't get too distraught or distracted or caught up in the decrees and mandates of emperors and senators and governors.

God is ultimately doing something, and we usually don't catch on until later!

If people in Joseph and Mary's day were looking to Rome and grumbling about Rome and upset with Rome, they were looking in the wrong direction.

Caesar Augustus thought he was in charge, but no, no! God was in charge of Caesar Augustus.



Do you ever start to believe that politicians control you? Do you ever think they are in charge? Are they really?

Yes, this trip couldn't have come at the worst time; it made their lives uncomfortable and the trip was difficult and even dangerous. But let's get our perspective straight — Joseph and Mary are not pawns in the hand of Caesar, Caesar is a pawn in the hands of God.

God's purposes are being fulfilled through this imperial decree.

And verse 3 tells us that all the empire is scattering back to their hometown origins to obey this “imperial decree.”

Now we know from history that wives would not have been required to accompany their husbands — certainly not a betrothed or engaged woman.

The original construction of **verses 4 and 5** indicate that Joseph is registering, and Mary is with him, or simply accompanying him as he registers.

Darrell L. Bock, [Luke: Volume 1](#) (Baker Academic, 1994), p. 205

Frankly, you have to wonder why she went along. We're not told why, although my guess would be that she welcomed the opportunity to get out of her town.

The shame she has experienced by her pregnancy would have been extremely painful. Nobody has believed her story, even Joseph needed an angel to confirm that she was still a virgin, otherwise he would have ended their engagement.

We're not told how difficult the journey was from Nazareth to Bethlehem, if they traveled alone or with others. We're not sure if she delivered Jesus in a hollowed-out cave, which was common in this region or in some open courtyard where animals were tied down for the night, or an animal enclosure connected to someone's house.

We are told here in **verse 7** that Mary wrapped Jesus in swaddling cloths by herself — which implies a midwife was not involved, for that would have been the customary role of the midwife.

Adapted from Barton, p. 41

There's so much we don't know. Luke is not writing to satisfy our curiosity; he's

keeping the account simple and uncluttered.

Adapted from Swindoll, p. 63

He's giving us enough details to allow us to see:

- the humility of Christ's incarnation;
- the unusual fulfillment of prophecy in Bethlehem;
- the perfection of God's timing and control.

And Luke also lets us know how some of the most unlikely people become the first evangelists.

They're introduced to them in **verse 8**:

And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.

Luke 2:8-10

By the way, this phrase **I bring you good news** is from the verb euangelizomai (ευαγγελιζομαι) — this gives us our English word evangelism — and it means, to tell somebody good news.

That's what evangelism is.

In the first century, this verb was used:

- of a messenger delivering a message from the king;
- it was used to announce the birth of a royal heir;
- and it was used to announce some victory.

Adapted from Swindoll, p. 65

And that's the gospel isn't it? We are delivering a message from the King that the royal heir has been born and he has won the victory!

Because this isn't just *any* baby.

Notice verse 11:

For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you; you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.

Luke 2:11-12

Now back up a minute: the angel is delivering this stunning incarnation news to shepherds?

Shepherds weren't allowed to testify in court, so why choose them to testify of Christ's birth? They worked on the Sabbath — evidently the sheep wouldn't take a day off.



Why would God announce the birth of His son to shepherds? What is the symbolism of the humble nature of Jesus' proclaimers?

According to the Mishna, the collection of Jewish laws and customs, shepherds were considered perpetually unclean — they were not allowed to enter the Temple.

Why announce this to them?

- What happened to the Sanhedrin — Israel's Supreme Court filled with Jewish scholars and attorneys?
- What happened to the leading Rabbis of the day?
- What happened to the High Priest in Jerusalem?

You would think this angel got the wrong address. Shepherds?

To this day around the world, shepherds are not the movers and shakers of society; especially in third world countries they are hired to do this difficult labor.

Timothy Laniak, in his journal he published a few years ago, recorded his insights gleaned from a year of field research among Bedouin shepherds in the Middle East.

In his introduction, he records what happened when he told them he wanted to live with them and research their lives and occupation.

Here's their response to him — "What is there to research about us? We just spend our lives running after sheep and goats. We don't have a home, nor an address. We sleep under the open sky, in winter, summer and rains; year after year, carrying cooking utensils on camels and mules; we can't even rest in one place for a week. Why will you waste your time — we are nothing!

Adapted from Timothy S. Laniak, *While Shepherds Watch Their Flocks* (ShepherdLeader Publications, 2007), p. 15

It's interesting how the gospel elevated this humble role to stand as a metaphor for biblical leadership:

- In ***Ephesians 4:11***, the term for pastors comes from this term for shepherds;
- The Apostle Peter called Jesus Christ ***the Chief Shepherd of the church (I Peter 5:4)***.
- The Lord Himself adopted this term as He referred to Himself as ***the Good Shepherd (John 10:11)*** and then.

Today is our very first Sunday to assemble under our new name — The Shepherd's Church. What a sweet image this presents of our relationship to Him and His leadership and care for us.

We desire to be known above all other possible titles and terms and names and

identifiers as simply a church that belongs to Him — our Great Shepherd.

Suddenly, we're told in verse 13 that this one angel is now joined by a multitude of angels who begin singing — which would have sounded more like chanting — and the earth must have shaken with their chorus, here are the lyrics:

"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom He is pleased!"

Luke 2:14

Jewish couples would typically hire local musicians to help them celebrate the birth of a child. Joseph and Mary couldn't afford that, and they were far from home, so God the Father sends the musicians directly from Heaven.

And when the concert was finished, the shepherds took off to locate this unusual scene, ***verse 16:***

And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.

Luke 2:16-18

When the shepherds arrived it was just ***Joseph, Mary and the baby*** — but now

it's clear there are others who have gathered. The news is spreading fast!

Everyone is mystified and marveling at this tale of angels singing that the Savior has just been born. "No, no," they may have thought. "The savior is already over there in Rome!"

Some of these people probably walked away thinking, "These shepherds have been outdoors way too long!"

Others no doubt asked questions. But we're told here in **verse 19**:

But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God.

Luke 2:19-20a

They're doing what the angels had just done — they are now singing the lyrics to the song they just learned. It stuck with them; they would never forget it.

We need to follow the example of these shepherds — let's keep singing about the glory and gospel of God.

And let's tell others the news! Let's ask the Lord to give us opportunities to deliver the gospel — the good news — to someone in this New Year.

You say, "But I'm not trained in evangelism."

- You don't need to go to medical school to tell someone you found a good doctor.

• Swindoll, p. 69

- You don't need to go to culinary school to tell someone you found a good restaurant.
- You don't need training to tell someone you found the Savior. If a group of unlettered, illiterate, poor shepherds can do this, so can we!

Well, several years after this scene here in Luke 2, Caesar Augustus, in the month of August, ironically, caught a chill on a night journey by ship.

Grant, p. 79

It developed into pneumonia, and this 76-year-old, son of a god, worshipped as deity, called the Savior of the world and the deliverer of peace, passed away.

And three days later, he did *not* rise again.

Jesus would have been around 18 years of age at the time; I can't help but wonder when He heard the news if He quietly reflected on the tragedy that this Caesar had adopted titles that Jesus knew by now belonged only to the Messiah — to Him.

- He was the divine ruler of a kingdom to come
- He was the son of God
- He was the only Savior
- He was the Prince of everlasting Peace

Who is He to you?



Who is he to you?

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