

Wednesday Evening Bible Study

November 28, 2018

The Gospel of Luke

The Birth of Jesus

Topics – Luke 2; Bethlehem;

Text – Luke 2:1 - 20

Introduction

At this point in our study in Luke, it would benefit us to take a birds eye view of all of the events surrounding the birth of Christ in chronological order.

The Chronology from A to Z

- A. Gabriel appears to Zacharias in the Temple (Luke 1:5 – 23)
- B. Elizabeth is 6 months pregnant (Luke 1:24 – 25)
- C. Gabriel appears to Mary in Nazareth (Luke 1:26 – 38)
- D. Mary visits Elizabeth near Jerusalem (Luke 1:39 – 45)
- E. The Magnificat – Mary praises the Lord (Luke 1:46 – 55)
- F. Mary returns to Nazareth (Luke 1:56)
- G. John the Baptist is born (Luke 1:57 – 80)
- H. When Mary returns to Nazareth, she is “found with child” (Matthew 1:18 & 19)
- I. The angel of the Lord appears to Joseph in a dream (Matthew 1:20 – 23)
- J. Joseph obeys the Lord and marries Mary (Matthew 1:24 - 25)
- K. Joseph and Mary travel to Bethlehem where Jesus is born (Luke 2:1 – 7)
- L. The angel of the Lord appears to the shepherds; and then appear a multitude of the heavenly host. (Luke 2:8 – 14)
- M. At the same time the star appears to the wise men. (Matthew 2:1)
- N. The shepherds go to the manger. (Luke 2:15 – 20)
- O. Eight days later Jesus was circumcised in Bethlehem. (Luke 1:21)
- P. Thirty-three days later Joseph and Mary travel to the Temple to *present him to the Lord*. (Luke 2:22 – 24)
- Q. They meet Simeon in Jerusalem. (Luke 2:25 – 35)
- R. They meet Anna in Jerusalem. (Luke 2:36 – 38)
- S. They return to Nazareth. (Luke 2:39)
- T. Meanwhile the wise men are following the star.
- U. The erroneously think that the star is leading them to Jerusalem and they go to Herod and he sends them to Bethlehem.
- V. When they leave the city, the star re-appears.
- W. They travel following the star to where the child is and present the child gifts.
- X. They return avoiding Jerusalem. Herod kills the children in Bethlehem.

Y. Joseph and Mary flee into Egypt after being warned by the angel of the Lord.

Z. Joseph and Mary return to Nazareth after the death of Herod.

Note – the events highlighted in yellow above are recorded in Matthew’s Gospel and occur chronologically before the events that we are discussing in this message from Luke. In order to get the complete picture, we will need to at least survey these events from Matthew’s perspective.

Read Matthew 1:18 - 25

The events highlighted in blue, are the events that fit within the Luke 2:1 – 20 time frame. Note also the appearance of the star to the wise men, which probably appeared around the same time the angels appeared to the Shepherds:

"Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him." (Matthew 2:1-2)

I The Decree of the Census (vs. 1 – 5)

Caesar Augustus was born Caius Octavius, and was the grand-nephew, adopted son, and primary heir to Julius Caesar.¹ After the death of Julius, there were power struggles within Rome, but in 31 B.C. Octavius became the supreme ruler by defeating Antony in a battle at Actium. The senate declared him to be emperor in 29 B.C. and two years later bestowed upon him the title “Augustus,” which meant “exalted one,” and has a religious connotation. With Augustus came the end of republican government, and Rome became an empire. During his reign the empire experienced prosperity and a time of peace, referred to as the *Pax Romana*. Augustus’ reign was over “all the world,” which was a reference to all of the inhabited, Greek-speaking parts of the then known world.

This “taxation” was enforced when Cyrenius was governor over Syria. Cyrenius (or Quirinius) actually was governor of Syria twice. He reigned as a military ruler from around 4 B.C. to 1 A.D., and then again from A.D. 6 – 10. It was during this first reign that this “taxation” or census was enforced. The word “taxed” here is ἀπογράφω – *apographō*, which means to write off, or record. Though this census was initially used to find out who where everybody was in the empire, it would eventually be used to levy taxes. It is believed that Augustus ordered the census in 8 B.C., but it took several years for it to be completed. Therefore, the date for Jesus’ birth is not certain, but because it had to be during the reign of Herod (Matthew 2) who ruled until 4 B.C., and also during the reign of Cyrenius.

This was a census or an enrolling of all of the people within the Roman Empire. Every person dwelling within the empire had to go to the place of their birth and register. Joseph was from the tribe of Judah and the family of David and thus had to return to the city of his birth – Bethlehem. This was in direct fulfillment of Micah’s prophecy:

"But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting."
(Micah 5:2)

God came out of a humble place called Bethlehem. If you are saved, God is in you; and He wants to come out of you and influence the world around you.

¹ MacArthur, J., Jr. (Ed.). (1997). *The MacArthur Study Bible* (electronic ed., p. 1514). Nashville, TN: Word Pub.

Bethlehem, which means “house of bread,” was approximately 2350 feet above sea level, which is the reason why Joseph and Mary had to travel “up” from Galilee. According to Swindoll, Bethlehem was normally a quiet, rural, farming community:

Locals cultivated fig trees, olive groves, and vineyards, while vast flocks of sheep and goats grazed the surrounding valleys. Five to seven miles of rugged terrain separated Bethlehem from Jerusalem, providing the kind of rural isolation typical of farming communities. The census, however, brought throngs of David’s descendants from all over Herod’s territory.²

It is very interesting that an earthly king who sought to exalt himself, sent out an order which required that two young peasants from Nazareth travel down to Bethlehem, and there she would give birth in a manger to a Son who truly was “the exalted one.”

“For whosoever exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.” (Luke 14:11)

Read Philippians 2:1 - 11

II The Birth of the Saviour (vs. 6 – 7)

It is very peculiar that the biggest event in the history of the world is dealt with in two simple verses. No hype, no fanfare – just the Truth. God incarnate.

The people of Israel are a very hospitable people. No doubt, Joseph and Mary would have easily found lodging nearly anywhere within Bethlehem under normal circumstances. However, the city was overrun by many visitors that were in town to participate in this census. The census possibly took a long time to complete, which would have caused Joseph and Mary to remain there longer than expected.

John Phillips has a beautiful way with the English language, and his description of this scene is remarkable:

The journey took at least three days. The travelers arrived at Jerusalem and continued the five or six more miles south to Bethlehem. When they arrived there, the place was packed. Joseph pushed his way inside the inn to beg and plead for a room for by now the birth of Jesus was imminent. The inn itself had a long history. It was known as Chimham’s Inn (2 Sam. 19:38–40; Jer. 41:17) and was built by that loyal servant of David after he became a member of David’s inner circle. (Jeremiah had spent a night there when he was being abducted and taken to Egypt many years earlier.)

“No room!” That was the innkeeper’s last word. “We are full. You can see that for yourself. There’s not one room vacant.” Then, in a moment of compunction, he said, “But there’s the cattle shed. Maybe you could make do there.”

“No room!” That was not true. There was the innkeeper’s own room, but he never once considered that. No indeed! Let these peasants with the Nazareth accent make do with the shed. The “cattle shed” of such an Eastern inn was often a cave, which seems to have been the case here.

So in a rough, cold cave attached to an ancient inn, the Son of God entered into human life. Oxen shook their shaggy heads, and camels looked around with disdain. The floor was unspeakably foul. Bats flew in and out. No hot water, sanitation, or midwife was available. In the nearby inn, paying guests called for food and drink and sang songs or sought their beds.

The awesome Child was born at last. Joseph knocked some boards together to make a manger and lined it with straw, and the wondrous Child slept, wrapped in swaddling clothes. The word Luke used for

² Swindoll, Charles R.. Insights on Luke (Swindoll's Living Insights New Testament Commentary Book 3) (pp. 64-65). Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.. Kindle Edition.

“swaddling” is one of his medical terms. It means “bandages,” so even in the midst of newborn life is a hint of death.³

III The Rejoicing of the Shepherds (vs. 8 – 20)

It is fascinating that God chose shepherds to be witnesses to the birth of His Son. Why didn't God contact Caesar, or Herod? Why not the high priest in the Temple? God revealed the most significant event in earth's history to humble servants, and gave them an exclusive invitation to see it for themselves.

You will notice that this time the news is delivered by “the Angel of the Lord.” It was Gabriel that appeared to Zacharias and Mary in Luke 1.

The Angel of the Lord makes frequent appearances in the Old Testament, as well as a few in the New. Many sound Bible expositors believe that the Angel of the Lord of the Old Testament is actually a pre-incarnate appearance of Christ. However, his frequent New Testament appearances make this interpretation difficult, if not unlikely.

Note regarding the Angel of the Lord from a previous study:

Many would claim that the Angel of the Lord in the Old Testament is a pre-incarnate appearance of the Lord Jesus Christ. This is known as a Christophany or a Theophany:

- 1.) Appearance to Hagar: Proclamation (Genesis 16:7-14)
- 2.) Appearance to Abraham: Proclamation (Genesis 18:1; 22:11-13)
- 3.) Appearance to Jacob: Proclamation (Genesis 28:13; 32:24-32; 48:16)
- 4.) Appearance to Moses: Proclamation (Exodus 3:2-6; 23:20; 33:18-23)
- 5.) Appearance as Pillar of Cloud/ Fire: Protection (Exodus 14:19-21)
- 6.) Appearance to Joshua: Proclamation (Joshua 5:13-15)
- 7.) Appearance to Balaam: Punishment (Numbers 22:22-35)
- 8.) Appearance to Gideon: Proclamation (Judges 6:11-24)
- 9.) Appearance to Manoah: Proclamation (Judges 13:2-23)
- 10.) Appearance to David: Punishment (I Chronicles 21:15-18)
- 11.) Appearance to Elijah: Proclamation (I Kings 19:5-8)
- 12.) Appearance to the Assyrian Army: Power (II Kings 19:35)
- 13.) Appearance to Isaiah: Proclamation (Isaiah 6:1-13)
- 14.) Appearance to the Three Hebrew Children: Protection (Daniel 3:25)
- 15.) Appearance to Daniel: Protection (Daniel 6:22; 7:9-14)
- 16.) Appearance to Zechariah: Protection (Zechariah 1:8-13; 2:8-11; 3:10)

The problem with this theory is The Angel of the Lord also appears in the New Testament:

"But while he thought on these things, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream, saying, Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost." (Matthew 1:20)

"And when they were departed, behold, the angel of the Lord appeareth to Joseph in a dream, saying, Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and flee into Egypt, and be thou there until I bring thee word: for Herod will seek the young child to destroy him." (Matthew 2:13)

"And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid." (Luke 2:9)

See Also Acts 5:19; 8:26; 12:7; 12:23

The announcement of the Angel was followed by an appearance of a host of angels. The phrase indicates that there was a great number of an orderly army of angels. Note they didn't sing, they [said].

The shepherds went to meet the Saviour and they left praising God, and declaring the glory of God to the world around them. Isn't that what we should be doing today?

³ Phillips, J. (2009). *Exploring the Gospel of Luke: An Expository Commentary* (Lk 2:1–7). Kregel Publications; WORDsearch Corp.

