

The Magnificence of Christmas

When we were married, we had photos taken of our wedding. Couples who have photos of their wedding, often look at them later to remember the happy event. We did that some years ago. Maybe you have. When I looked at our photos, I said to myself, “Wow, you have sure changed!” Back then I was skinny as a rail, as some would say. Today some people would say I was slender.

Our wedding was fun. Friends were there. I do not remember much about the reception line, but I do remember getting away as soon as we could in our old, green Nash Rambler. We had just bought the car. We were in Southern California, and we as drove onto the Long Beach Freeway going towards downtown Los Angeles, the radiator started leaking. We

finally arrived at our apartment and eventually had the radiator repaired. We spent the vast majority of the meager funds that we were going to use for our honeymoon repairing the radiator. Needless to say, we had to re-plan our honeymoon. We had to scale

back our plans. We were disappointed. But the Lord had a reason for it, and used that experience in our life.

HONEYMOON FOR JOSEPH AND MARY. Our study today is about Joseph and Mary. There is a real sense in which things did not go as they wanted either. This couple, as we have seen in previous studies, had some difficult moments. Mary was visited by an angel and was told that she was going to give birth to the promised one — the Messiah. That was

great news for her. But not everyone shared her joy. Her future husband, Joseph, had some doubts about the baby. Just imagine Mary telling her mother and father about the wonderful visit she had from an angel and that she was going to have a baby! I wonder if her parents were really excited to hear the news? Joseph obviously was not very excited when she explained it to him either. It was very obvious that Joseph thought that Mary was not being honest—maybe her mother did also. Maybe Joseph’s parents thought Mary was lying about the baby. The relationship between Mary, Joseph and their families was off to a rocky start.

To be frank, our simple radiator problem with the green Nash Rambler pales in comparison to the trauma that Mary

and Joseph went through. But the Lord rescued the situation by giving Joseph a dream. In the dream Joseph was encouraged to continue with the relationship and eventually marry Mary.

In Luke 2:21-24, we discover that when Mary and Joseph dedicated Jesus in

the temple, this couple was poor. The reason we know this couple was poor was that they offered birds as a sacrifice at the dedication of Jesus. The Mosaic Law prescribed that there were two kinds of sacrifices that could be given at the dedication of a child. An offering of birds could be given by people of little means. That is what they gave, revealing that they were poor. Not only did they suffer the emotional trauma with regards to the virgin birth of Jesus, but



Jesus — The Magnificence of Christmas

they were experiencing their circumstances as a poor couple! Remember that Jesus was conceived in Mary's virgin womb by the Holy Spirit. One would think these circumstances were challenging enough, but Luke 2:1 tells us that things actually became worse.

Now in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth. This was the first census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. And everyone was on his way to register for the census, each to his own city. Luke 2:1-3 (NASB)

Here we are told that Caesar Augustus had issued a decree that people had to go to the city in which they had been born and participate in a census. Most Bible scholars believe this was in preparation for a tax that would be levied. Not only was it a census, but it was a tax. So a poor couple had to make a trip that they had not planned, had to spend money that most likely they did not want to spend, and had to do it when Mary was due to deliver her child. That was not good news for this couple. Yet, that is exactly what happened.

Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David, in order to register along with Mary, who was engaged to him, and was with child. Luke 2:4-5 (NASB)

Their trip was about 65 miles. It would have been a hard trip that probably took less than a week. But for a pregnant Mary, that must have been a difficult trip, riding on an animal. The journey simply came at the wrong time.

FULFILLMENT OF MICAH 5:2. I feel sorry for Joseph and Mary. They must have struggled. My wife and I may have struggled over a leaking radiator in that Nash Rambler, but that was nothing compared to what this couple experienced. But God had a reason for it. God had already fulfilled a number of prophecies related to Jesus' birth. He had fulfilled a prophecy about the conception of Jesus in a virgin. Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit in Mary. It was to be a virgin birth with no human male involved.

Other prophecies had already been fulfilled, but there was a very important prophecy that had not been fulfilled yet. It is a prophecy found in Micah 5:2 which says the Messiah would be born in a little town called Bethlehem. This small town is about six miles south of Jerusalem. This means that Mary and Joseph had to take a trip from Nazareth all the way up to this little town so the prophecy could be fulfilled, because God had said the Messiah would be born there. This means God controlled circumstances to make this happen. Caesar issued a decree that a census would be taken so that people would have to return to the city of their origin. That forced Joseph and Mary to leave Nazareth and travel up to Bethlehem. It is truly amazing to realize that is exactly what God did. God caused this couple to take a trip that they would not otherwise have taken. Why? In order to keep His promise and to fulfill His word. When God says something is going to happen, it will happen.

MARY GIVES BIRTH TO JESUS IN BETHLEHEM. Look at verse 6-7,

While they were there, the days were completed for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son; and she wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. Luke 2:6-7 (NASB)

Shortly after the couple arrived in Bethlehem, Mary started feeling birth pangs. We are told that while they were there, she gave birth to Jesus. Verse 7 says there was no room for them in the inn. The Greek word that is used for "inn" is not the word normally used for an inn, hotel, or motel. The Greek word that is used here is *katalyma*. It actually has the idea of a guest room.

We have some interesting views about the Christmas account these days. The story has been repeatedly told in so many different ways, in books, various media and plays. But what is very interesting is that Jesus was not born as normally portrayed in an inn or in a cave. In those days, the homes typically had two levels. The people lived and slept on the second level of the home. The bottom floor was for cooking food, and the guest room was located there. Also, the animals were kept at night in the ground floor of the home.

We believe that is the kind of home in which Mary and Joseph stayed. When scripture says there was no room for them in the “inn,” that means there was no more room for them in the guest quarters on the first floor of this home. So Mary and Joseph had to spend the night where the animals were on the lower floor of the home. Jesus was born there.

The Bible says that Jesus was put in a manger or a feeding trough. The feeding trough, more than likely, was attached to the wall, or it might have been off to the side of the room. Whether you believe Jesus was born in a cave, or someplace else, the story is essentially the same. Jesus’ first bed was in a feeding trough, with animals nearby.

Note we are told that Jesus was wrapped in cloths. Why did Luke tell us that He was wrapped in cloths? There are so many details missing, but there is a reason why we are given this detail. We will talk about that soon.

SHEPHERDS OUT IN THE FIELDS AT NIGHT. Just like in a good movie, the camera leaves the scene of Joseph and Mary and Jesus in the guest room, and we now see what is happening out in the dark fields with some shepherds. Verses 8-9 state,

In the same region there were some shepherds staying out in the fields and keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were terribly frightened. Luke 2:8-9 (NASB)

The Greek text is very descriptive. It does not just say that they were terribly frightened. The Greek words are *phobeo phobos megas*. The literal Greek says that they were greatly “greatly fearing fear” or terrifyingly terrified. These shepherds were terribly terrified! Also notice we are told “The angel stood before them.” In many of the scenes about the angels and the shepherds, there is a choir of angels in the sky above, singing, with the shepherds down below and light shining down. That is not completely accurate. The correct scene is that an angel stood on the ground in front of the shepherds. That is the idea.

The angel stood before them and they were terribly frightened. Verses 10-11 add,

But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” Luke 2:10-11 (NASB)

What a great message! “There has been born for you in the city of David”—that is, Bethlehem or David’s place of birth—“a Savior!” He is Christ, or Messiah, the Lord. That is the message of the angel. Is it not interesting that today our Christmas cards and the messages we hear on television and radio are often about peace and good will towards men?

We do not hear proclaimed so often that Jesus is Christ the Lord! He is the Savior of the world! That was an important part of the message of the angel also. We have to come to church to hear that message; or we have to read it in the Bible. The best message of all is that the Savior, Christ the Lord, was born in Bethlehem.

Verse 12 adds:

This will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. Luke 2:12 (NASB)

When I read this verse, I wondered why is a baby “wrapped in cloths” a sign? Today, it is difficult to answer this question because we are used to disposable diapers or cloth diapers. But what is clear is that the swaddling cloths were unique and the fact that Jesus was in a manger was unique. Otherwise, the angel would not have mentioned the swaddling cloths. It has been reported that in those days cloth diapers could only be afforded by the wealthy. So when the shepherds found Jesus, they saw an unusual scene. He was lying in a manger, near a group of animals. But He is wrapped in cloth diapers that only the wealthy people could afford—not a poor couple. It was a very inconsistent picture to have a baby wearing cloth diapers or swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. Now that was a sign for these shepherds! The angel gave them a great sign. “You will find Him wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

Verse 13 says,

And suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of

the heavenly host, praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased. Luke 2:13-14 (NASB)

The angel said, “Peace on earth,” but not for everyone. Peace on earth—was a promise not for the entire world. Peace on earth—not for our nation. The angel was proclaiming “Peace on earth for those with whom He is well pleased.”

Do you belong to Him today? Are you one of His chosen ones? Have you put your faith in Jesus Christ? If so, then you are one of those with whom He is well pleased. You are one who belongs to Him. You are part of His family, and He is pleased with you because of what Jesus did thirty-three years or so later.

Verses 15-20 continue telling us what happened next,

When the angels had gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds began saying to one another, “Let us go straight to Bethlehem then, and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has made known to us.” So they came in a hurry and found their way to Mary and Joseph, and the baby as He lay in the manger. When they had seen this, they made known the statement which had been told them about this Child. And all who heard it wondered at the things which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary treasured all these things, pondering them in her heart. The shepherds went back, glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen, just as had been told them. Luke 2:15-20 (NASB)

What a wonderful message these shepherds received. These shepherds had been told that the Messiah, the Lord, had arrived. Then they left the sheep and found Jesus in a manger. Do you wonder how the shepherds found Jesus? I doubt that the shepherds knew exactly where they were going. I suspect that they went from one place to another asking about a newborn baby that was wrapped in cloths and in a manger. Can you just imagine how people must have been reacting? More than likely, these shepherds probably told them about the angels. They probably had the entire little town talking and wondering what all was really happening! Can you imagine what eventually happened when they finally

found Jesus among the animals, and lying in the manger? If we correctly understand the scene, there were guests in the lower part of the house. Can you just imagine how they responded? I believe there was a wealthy family that may have provided the swaddling clothes. Can you imagine what people were saying as these shepherds walked toward Jesus?

In verse 19 we are told that Mary treasured these things and pondered them in her heart. Most likely Mary knew what the angels had said to the shepherds. These shepherds were telling everybody about what the angels had said. Imagine the excitement that must have been in that small town.

JESUS IS OUR HUMBLE SAVIOR. When Jesus was born, He was not born into the family of a chief priest. When Jesus was born, He was not born into the family of a king. When Jesus was born, He was not born into the family of the Levites. When Jesus was born, He was not born into a wealthy family. When Jesus was born, it was not in a hospital. When Jesus was born, He was not born in a luxurious hotel. When Jesus was born, He was not born in a home with servants. No, when Jesus was born, He was born into humble circumstances. His bed was a manger among some animals, and His parents were of humble means.

He chose the humble, poor couple as His parents. He was born to a righteous couple, because we are told in Matthew 1:19 that Joseph was righteous, and Mary was chosen by God the Father to be Jesus’ human mother. Did you know that righteousness and holiness are a priority? Jesus did not mind being born into a poor family because He was to have a ministry to poor people. The gospel is for those who are poor in spirit. The gospel is for those who know that they need a Savior. Jesus came for the poor in spirit. He did not come for the wealthy. Oh, not that He ignores the wealthy, but He came as a poor person to demonstrate His humility. We have a loving God who cares about us. The announcement of His birth was not by See’s candy cigars. The announcement of His birth was not by birth announcement cards. The announcement of His birth was by angels, to shepherds who were in a field taking care of lambs that were headed for slaughter in Jerusalem. The announcement came to shepherds, declaring that the Savior, Christ the Lord was born.

That was the announcement. The angels gave the most important announcement that had rung in the heavens for ages and ages. The shepherds understood and went looking for their Savior and Messiah, Christ the Lord.

CONCLUSION. We have talked in past studies about the miracle of Christmas, which was the virgin birth. We have talked about the mystery of Christmas, which was God becoming man. In this study we have talked about the magnificence of Christmas, which is Jesus. He was and is a gift! He was a gift to Mary and to Joseph. He was a gift to the shepherds. He was a gift to the people in Bethlehem. He is a gift to us today as well. Jesus is the best gift. Jesus is the magnificence of Christmas!

If you desire to have your sins forgiven, then Jesus will forgive your sins if that is your heart's desire. If you believe that Jesus, our God, died for your sins and rose again, and if you desire to have your life changed and transformed, Jesus will do that. For those of us who already believe in Jesus Christ, for those of us who have already asked Him to forgive us of our sins, just bear in mind that Jesus is the best gift of all. He fulfilled all of God's promise.