

THE FIRST ADVENT OF THE SAVIOR

Reason to Celebrate: God Came to Earth Wrapped in Flesh

It has been said that the beauty of the rainbow in our life comes only after the storm. Life's storms are unavoidable. While Christians know that Jesus is the Only Savior, as we face the trials of life we often put that **Truth** in a back corner of our minds. Even though we have entrusted our eternal salvation into His capable hands, we often get caught up in webs of worry forgetting that the Great God in Heaven who is the Eternal Word, the Bread of Life, our Good Shepherd, the Living Door behind which we can hide, is able to provide for all our needs.

In this season of gift-giving, let us be reminded of God's Perfect Gift to the human race that came to earth wrapped not in paper and ribbons but in human flesh. Many of our answers to prayer do not always come in the way we might expect. Such was the case when God's Perfect Gift to mankind came to earth. The Jewish people had been waiting for their the Coming King for centuries. *Isaiah 9:6 (ESV)* ⁶ *For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.* When God became a Man, He did not put Himself above us. Hallelujah! He became one of us.

Luke wrote his Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles to someone named Theophilus. (*Luke 1:3 and Acts 1:1*). The meaning of the name is Friend of God. Much speculation surrounds Theophilus, but little is known for certain about him. We pick up at the point in Luke's story at the birth of Jesus.

John 1:14 (ESV) ¹⁴ And the Word became flesh
and dwelt among us...

Read Luke 2:1-7 (ESV) ¹ *In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered.* ² *This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria.* ³ *And all went to be registered, each to his own town.* ⁴ *And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David,* ⁵ *to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.* ⁶ *And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth.* ⁷ *And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.*

Luke wrote of a census conducted by the Roman Empire. Roman historical records place the enrollment of Quirinius in 7 A.D. which would have been 10 or 12 years after Jesus was born. This historical discrepancy was for a long time troublesome to biblical students. According to Halley's Handbook ancient papyri have now been discovered from which it is learned that Quirinius was governor of Syria two times. This explains why Luke wrote that *This was the first*

census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria. It has also been found that people were required to go to their ancestral homes to register. The spades of archeologists continue to confirm the accuracy of the Word of God.

It was Caesar's plan that the people would be registered for the purpose of taxation. God used this human plan to bring His Son into the world at the right time in the prophesied place. **Micah 5:2 (ESV)** ² *But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.* Do not be surprised that God works through government authorities even when that government does not know the Lord. Caesar Augustus' desire was to make himself into a god. He wanted to be worshiped. Unknowingly, he signed a tax bill that would set the stage for the ruler of Israel to be born in Bethlehem as prophesied opening the way for the One who is the King of kings and Lord of lords!

In depictions of the birth of Jesus, there is always an innkeeper in the story. However, scripture makes no mention of an innkeeper. Scripture only says, *there was no room for them in the inn.* It is possible that the little town of Bethlehem was so crowded, Joseph and Mary never made personal contact with the innkeeper. Our idea of the inn is probably very different from what existed at the time. Public inns in those days consisted of a walled-in area with a well. Some of the larger inns did have rooms surrounding the court. Tradition says that Jesus was born in a cave. This is based on the fact that caves were often used as stables in those days. There is only one bit of information we know for sure – Mary placed her baby in a manger. At that time, mangers were not anything like the feeding troughs we think of today. In fact, they were often nothing more than an indentation in rock or limestone inside a cave. Jesus during His earthly ministry would said in **Luke 9:58 (ESV)** ⁵⁸ ... *“Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.”* We see from His birth, it had been that way from the start.

We love to romanticize the birth of Christ with snowflakes and fresh fallen snow. However, the month and day of Jesus' birth are unknown. December 25 was chosen in the 4th century as the day to celebrate Jesus' birth. This date coincided with the winter solstice and had been the date for a pagan feast. Christians tried to transform that pagan celebration into a time to commemorate Christ's birth. The pagan associations of long ago have been lost. However, we must be careful not to develop modern-day paganism of our own.

In the early centuries, Christians were much more likely to celebrate the day of a person's death than the person's birthday. Very early in church history an annual observance of the death of Christ began. Even before the 4th century, churches in the East—Egypt, Asia Minor, and Antioch—observed Epiphany, the manifestation of God to the world, celebrating Christ's baptism, His birth, and the visit of the Magi.

Believers can capitalize on the Christmas season as a family tradition and as a learning experience much like the Old Testament Passover was to be used by families in Israel. It all depends on the spirit and attitude in which it is done. We can be very negative and critical, or we can be positive and use the season as a time to remember and commemorate the birth of our Savior. We can use it as a time to demonstrate love for others in a special way. We can make something evil out of it or something good.

We do know for sure that shepherds were in the fields at the birth of Jesus because the Bible tells us so

Read Luke 2:8-12 (ESV) ⁸ *And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.* ⁹ *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.* ¹⁰ *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."* ¹¹ *For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.* ¹² *And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger."*

The first keeper of sheep in the Bible was Adam's son Abel. Shepherding was the chief occupation of the Israelites in the early days: Abraham, Jacob, Moses, and David herded sheep. However, the shepherds of the first century Jewish society were regarded as low class citizens. It was to these men that the Angel of the Lord spoke. God speaks to those who will listen no matter what our occupation or lack of one or where we are. It would have been a magnificent experience to have been in that shepherds' field that night. Nevertheless, we can recognize the presence of God in our lives by following David's recommendation in **Psalm 46:10 (ESV)** ¹⁰ *"Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!"*

Some were expecting that God would speak to the priests or officials of the land; however, God in His wisdom chose to speak to those who would listen.

Like Zacharias, Mary, Joseph and a host of others throughout scripture, the shepherds were told to *fear not*. It is so easy to be overtaken by fear. An angel of the Lord may never appear above us telling us not to be afraid. But those very words are whispering to us down through the ages. When you feel yourself giving into the ugly ravages of fear, cling to this scripture: **Psalm 56:11 (ESV)** ¹¹ *in God I trust; I shall not be afraid. What can man do to me?* It is important in our walk with the Lord to not give in to Satan's attack of fear. Remember: most of the things we worry about – never happen!

Luke did not record the name of the angel who initiated God's message from on high. Perhaps it was Gabriel again. Whoever this heavenly messenger was, we know that he was not alone that night.

Read Luke 2:13-15 (ESV) ¹³ *And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,* ¹⁴ *“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”* ¹⁵ *When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.”*

We normally think of a host as someone entertaining guests. Host in this passage is a reference to the host of angels at God’s command – an angel army is the best way to describe those who appeared to the shepherds. The angels' song, often called the *Gloria* after its first word in the Latin translation, is the basis for many modern choral works, traditional Christmas carols, and ancient liturgical chants. As I think on that night the words of a Chris Tomlin song come to my mind: I know who goes before me – I know who stands behind – the God of angel armies is always by my side!

The phrase *over to Bethlehem* suggests that these men were located some distance away, but they were willing to make the trip in order to see the newborn Messiah. Undoubtedly, they left some behind to care for their flocks. Someone has called the shepherds quick trip to Bethlehem the first Christmas rush which is quite different from the Christmas rush of modern times.

Read Luke 2:16-18 (ESV) ¹⁶ *And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger.* ¹⁷ *And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child.* ¹⁸ *And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.*

They went with haste – Are you excited enough about the long-expected Savior to share the news like those shepherds did? You get a new job and you tell it! You get a pet and you post it on Facebook! A child is born into the family and you tell it! God’s Son was born! Let’s tell it! It does not matter whether the day was exactly December 25. What matters is that **WE TELL THE GOOD NEWS – GOD SENT A SAVIOR!**

Read Luke 2:19-20 (ESV) ¹⁹ *But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart.* ²⁰ *And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.*

We are wise to follow Mary’s example by treasuring the events surrounding the birth of our Savior and pondering them in our own hearts. The peace of Christmas will fill us with joy and wonder when we accept God’s Son as our Savior and worship Him as the Ruler of Our Heart.