

The shepherds and the birth of Jesus

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[0:00] So if you've got Luke chapter 2, we're going to look at the story that was read to us, the story of the birth of Jesus, the shepherds and the angels.

I presume it's a fairly familiar story, but I probably shouldn't take that for granted. We're just going to work our way through it a bit at a time and reflect on what it's saying.

It is, I think, a nice story. Shepherds, angels, baby being born, I think it's a nice story. I think it's a positive story. Nobody gets killed in this story. Not yet, anyway.

Not every story surrounding Jesus' birth is actually suitable for children. The way Matthew tells it, there are some very unpleasant side effects to the birth of Jesus, but as Luke tells it, it's nice.

And, of course, not everything to do with Jesus is cosy and fluffy. Jesus had some very hard things to say, and there were some very tough things about him.

[1:10] Not least, of course, the manner of his reception as a grown-up. He didn't get treated well. In many ways, the manner of his death. His death was not a pretty death.

But the story that we have before us, I think, is nice. And I think it's a story with a sort of invitation in it. It's a story that invites us into it.

And I'll try and explain why I think that as we go through. So let's simply look at what it actually says. It starts off with the decree of the emperor, chapter 2, verse 1.

In those days, Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. Worth thinking about what's going on there.

This is the emperor, big chief, big boss, big boss of the whole world. As he sees it, it's the whole world.

[2:14] I'm sure there are parts of the world that he was ignorant of. But as he sees it, he's the boss of the whole world. So he can say, do this, and everybody has to do it.

And that's what he's doing here. He's saying, I would like a list of everybody in my world for taxation purposes. Do it.

And he issues a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. So there's the emperor. And he wants everyone to be written down.

Now the word for census is to do with the word writing. He wants a piece of writing with everybody's name on it. So if you think today and the internet is intrusive into your privacy, just remember, people have been doing these things for thousands of years.

They want a list of everybody, where they live, so they can tax them. And the word is used three times.

[3:14] And we might not notice it. So it's a writing word. So Caesar Augustus issued a decree that the writing should be taken of the entire Roman world.

This was the first writing down. Verse 2 that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria. And everyone went to his own town to write it down. So the word is used three times.

Just so that we get the point of what this man's doing, this emperor is saying, I want your details on my list of names. Do it.

So there's the lists that are going to be written on. We're told that Quirinius was governor of Syria. And everybody goes to their hometown. So I don't know whether you could imagine the scurrying around that this means.

Because you're told you're sitting nice and comfortably in Shoram or wherever it is, or Syria or Nazareth. And this decree comes.

[4:12] You go to get your name written down in your traditional family home. And you can't say, I'm busy. I'm painting.

I'm doing the garden. My wife's pregnant. You've just got to go. So he's sending people scurrying hither and thither. Everybody goes to their hometown. And there they are going off in all directions. It's interesting that there was such thing as a hometown. Because if you think nowadays in the complexity of society, if you were asked to go to your hometown, it might not be so easy. Because your mum might have come from somewhere, and your dad from somewhere else. And your mum's mum might be from somewhere, and your mum's dad might be from somewhere else. So where is your hometown?

It seems as though it was more clear cut in those days. Joseph was from Bethlehem. That's the town where the descendants of David live.

[5:14] That's where his roots were. That's where his home was. And that's where he had to go. And this decree from this important man, the man who is a man of great power, and he's not afraid to use that power, sends people scurrying all over that area to go to their hometown to be registered, to have their names written down.

And you might think that this guy, taking it into his head to flex his bureaucratic muscles and say, get your names written down, I've just decided you do it, you'd think that this might surprise God, that they think this might mess up his plans.

Do you think God had written this in? Well, apparently not. Because one of the rather charming features of this story is that this ends up getting Joseph and Mary to exactly the right place, at exactly the right time, for the baby to be born in Bethlehem, which, as you may know, was a prophecy this baby would be born in Bethlehem.

And I think we can stop and think that the God who is the God of this story is not taken by surprise by politicians or emperors or people who suddenly take ideas into their heads and have the power to do quite unreasonable things.

God is not put off his stroke by world rulers. God is not surprised and sent back to do Plan B in anxious fretfulness by Brexit or by Donald Trump or by Vladimir Putin or anybody.

[7:19] God is not a good idea. The God, just in these few sentences, we see that the God who is the back of this story is very subtle, very wise.

sovereign is the word that Christians would use. He's in charge of everything from the big movements of politics to the tiny movements of atoms to the waving of the grass.

He has that all in his hand. And there's a children's song, isn't it? He has the whole world in his hand. And this is an example of exactly that. Of course, the other thing this does is in a rather subtle way to put Jesus onto the world stage.

Because Luke is going to tell us that this baby grows up to be someone so important that it could be said of this baby, Jesus is Lord.

And there's a little bit of a collision course there with Caesar Augustus because Caesar would like everybody to think Caesar is Lord. But in a rather quiet way, the claim is beginning to be put forward.

[8:33] It isn't Caesar who is Lord. It's Jesus who is Lord. So we have that thought in those first few sentences. So let's send Joseph going to Bethlehem.

Verse four. So Joseph went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea to Bethlehem, the town of David. He goes up because Nazareth is in the north.

But if you go to Jerusalem, you go up because Jerusalem is more important. The same way that you go up to Oxford because Oxford is supposed to be more important than anywhere else.

That's what they say. So they go up from the town of Nazareth, going south, you see, to Judea, to Bethlehem, to the town of David because he belonged to the house and line of David.

He went there to have his name signed up with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. So let's send Joseph on his way to Bethlehem.

[9:39] That's Bethlehem down at the bottom there. It's Joseph on his way. He goes there because he's of the ancient, it's the ancient home of

David's clan and family and tribe.

And of course he has to take Mary with him. And I was trying to get my head around what that would mean for this man, presumably fairly young man, to take his heavily pregnant, well, she's not his wife, you see, and that's another source of embarrassment and confusion there because they're not yet married.

So socially speaking, in that context, this is a rather dodgy situation to be in. He has to take Mary. And I think the fact that she's pregnant probably takes these other things out of the picture because we have to think of her making this journey.

It doesn't say on a donkey. I don't know whether it was on a donkey. It's quite a long way to travel for somebody in their last stages of pregnancy. I remember taking my wife to deliver our first child. We only went around the corner to the hospital here and every bump, what do you think you're doing? Why are you driving like that? I'm trying my best. But you just think for a long journey, I think that would have been a difficult one.

[11:00] It says that she was, see in verse five, it says she was pledged to be married and was expecting a child. She was pledged, the word doesn't say, it doesn't include child inside, it just says swelling, tummy was big.

That must have been quite a thing for Joseph in those days, very conservative sexual morality. Who's this? Your wife? No. What are you then?

We're pledged to be married. She's put on quite a bit of weight, hasn't she? You know, there's this sort of thought there that's going on. So I think a difficult journey, but an exactly right journey because God's plan prophesied that the king would be born in Bethlehem.

And you see this sort of swirl of circumstances which brings this about. So she is, although it's difficult, although there's embarrassment with it and probably discomfort, I would have thought, but she ends up, they both end up in exactly the right place at exactly the right time.

So let's move on to what it says. It says in verse 6, while they were there, the time came for the baby to be born and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son, and she wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger because there was no room for them in the, whatever that word is, in.

[12:39] So just as there was an emphasis by repetition on the writing down of names, there's an emphasis by repetition on the idea of the child. So she, let's just see, the time of, while she was there, the time for the baby to be born, the time of childing came near.

I'm giving you a clunky translation here. She gave birth to her firstborn, the son. She childed her son and there is a baby for us to admire. The first child, a son.

So we're, our focus goes on to this birth. I'm not giving any of the details of it but we're just told that she childed, she gave birth to her son and she swaddled him.

She wrapped him in cloths. So it's just one word in the original, meaning to wrap in strips of linen. She swaddled him. We don't do that now, do we? We have all sorts of things like grow bags for babies or whatever they're called.

But that was the custom, you wrap the child in and she laid him, she put him down. Presumed he'd finished feeding, she was exhausted, put him down, she laid him, she reclined him, she put him to lie down in a feeding thing, a manger because there was no space for them in the inn.

[14:11] Well, was it an inn? The same word is used when Jesus says to his disciples at the Last Supper, go and inquire where I can use the guest room for the Last Supper.

From my research, it says it was the same word. So maybe it is the guest room. There's no room in the guest room. So perhaps they had family there. That would make sense, wouldn't it?

But still, no space. So it's a bit abnormal, a little bit unexpected. She wrapped him in linen, laid him down. There was no space.

And that just made me think, that's not the last time that Jesus would be wrapped in linen and laid down somewhere where he arrived at short notice.

It's true, isn't it? Because I'm thinking of his death. Sometimes you get clues that the writer invites you to think thoughts like that because he uses exactly the same words.

[15:23] Well, he doesn't in this case. It's just, it's just a thought really. But Jesus was later on wrapped in linen. And he was later on laid

in a place that he wasn't expecting, well, in a sense, wasn't expected to be.

He was laid in a tomb after his death. And the tomb was a borrowed tomb because he hadn't invested in the tomb. It was someone else's tomb. But maybe Luke is, just in a very quiet way, reflecting that even at the time of his birth, the things of his death are not completely absent. There are little echoes there of the fact that this child will one day die and that his death will be significant. Let's go now to the shepherds, shall we?

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. So there are the shepherds. You can see they're watching because it says they were watched. It says they were watching. They were watching with a watch or something like that. They were keeping a lookout, looking out. There's a sheep being looked at. I couldn't quite work out the architecture of this, whether it was a pen on the sort of countryside.

[16:46] It could have been a pen that they were in rather than just letting them wander all over the place. But anyway, they're watching them. The shepherds are in the fields. So there's a word for like camping out. They were watching, watch over their sheep at night.

And then suddenly we get this. Verse 9, an angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone round them and they were terrified.

So I don't know what an angel looks like. So I've done a person in purple. But we're told glory shone around. So suddenly in this dark, you know, probably watching, I don't know, moonlight, I don't know.

But they're watching carefully and then suddenly this angel stands there and pow! His glory irradiates the scene, gleams and shines all around them.

Of course, they're terrified. This is they feared with a great fear. I think you and I would do the same, wouldn't we? So this, though I said it's a nice story, it's not a story without fear.

[17:50] These people are petrified. But it's not a nasty fear like you might wake up fearful of zombies going to get you or werewolves or something unclean and nasty.

This is a clean fear because it's a right thing to be fearful of God and his glory. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

But the angel says to them, verse 10, do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.

And the emotional temperature changes from fear and the angel says, fear is not the appropriate response. Joy is the appropriate response. This is good.

What's happening here is so good that if your heart was tuned up properly, you would go, wow, hooray, brilliant.

[18:48] The problem is that for most of us our hearts are not tuned up properly. We go, wow, hooray, brilliant at completely trivial things. And when we read about this we think, so what?

And the angel is saying, this is actually, if you got the hang of this, you would say of this, wow, brilliant, amazing. This is good news of great joy, he says.

And he explains why. And he explains why in quite a lot of detail. I won't give you all the detail, but I'll just say this, what he says in verse 11. Today in the town of David, a saviour has been born to you.

He is Christ the Lord. And so he sandwiches together a huge number of very powerful strands of thought from God's dealings with his people, God's promises.

David, the king, a saviour. Well, those are quite rare saviours. And here is a saviour coming along. And he is Christ, so the Messiah.

[19:54] There's only one of those in this sense. And he is the Lord. And what are we to understand by that? Does he mean the Lord God? But certainly the Lord, as distinct from Caesar being Lord. So we perhaps would like to read on to find actually what the angel meant by all that.

But he certainly means something. And he says, here's a very practical way of finding out whether this is true. Here's a sign.

And the sign is, if you go into Bethlehem, so lock your sheep up or whatever, but go down, you will find a newborn baby swaddled.

And this is an unusual bit. You'll find him lying in a manger because there was no room at the inn. But you weren't to know that. But they'll be in a manger. What about that? And suddenly, a great company of the heavenly host appears with the angels.

So here's a suddenly. And I don't know what a great company of the heavenly host is, but it's usually the word used for an army. So there's something quite impressive about these angels.

[21:07] They're not sort of floaty around in 90s angels. It's used for an army. A great company of their heavenly host appeared. What does it say?

Praising God and saying, glory to God in the highest. On earth, peace to men on whom his favour rests. So, I take the view that angels can't sing.

Sorry, but anyway, they're saying this. So, a little bit like cyber men. They sort of chant something. So here they're saying, glory to God in the highest.

On earth, peace to men on whom his favour rests. And these are the angels. this great sort of trumpeting statement of glory. And very interesting, the last expression.

On earth, peace to men on whom his favour rests. So this is not God going out of his way to scare us. This is not God going out of his way to condemn us.

[22:12] But this is God saying, I care about you lot. You're such a funny lot. You get yourselves in such a pickle over all sorts of things. Some of you don't even believe I exist.

How weird is that? But I have goodwill towards you. My favour rests on you. And this is God moving out towards our race in favour, in kindness.

Which I think is rather brilliant. So there's the angels. And taking all this on board, verse 15, when the angels left them, when the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, this is good, they say, let's go and check it out.

Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has told us about. Now I said that this is a nice story. It's all full of positives.

This is a positive thing. They were invited to check it out. And they say, let's check it out. And they go and check it out.

[23:25] It's very positive. They did. They did that. I'm clicking. Anything going to happen? Yes. So let's follow on what happens here.

So they hurried off, verse 16, and found Mary and Joseph and the baby who was lying in the manger. Well we knew that but they found it exactly as it stated. And when they had seen him they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.

Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, so they go back to their sheep, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen which were just as they had been told.

Now notice a couple of repetitions there of what was told them is exactly what they found. So you see it in verse 15.

Let us go to what the Lord has told us about and where else is it? Well it's certainly at the end of verse 20.

[24:33] The things that they had heard and seen which were just as they had been told. So I've started using smaller writing there. That works. They responded quickly rather than saying well let's think about this.

Maybe we'll do this next week. They say we've heard about it now. Let's check it out now. Off they go. They found it as they were told.

Now let's see where are we finding that? Well it was Mary and Joseph and the baby who was lying in the manger. and I just can't light my eye on the bit that I wanted.

But they find Mary and Joseph just as they had been told. They spread the word presumably on their way back or to certain people around and about and they praised God that it was just as they had been told.

So I'd like to think about these shepherds and people ask the question why shepherds? Why does God bother to tell shepherds this sort of stuff?

[25:48] Why are they in the story? And of course there's various answers to that. And as I was thinking about it this time round because it's the sort of thing one has to think about every year I thought what are shepherds like?

In the Bible shepherds are like or likened to the leaders. So the idea of a shepherd and a leader is well established in the Bible.

So David the king of Israel used to be a shepherd of sheep and then he became a shepherd of Israel. A leader of Israel. And when the king was killed in history it said they wandered around like sheep without a shepherd.

And Jesus picks up on that and he says he sees people like sheep without a shepherd. They need a leader. And I wonder if these shepherds are sort of metaphorical for leaders. If you could imagine this being like a metaphor or a picture of the guardians the leaders of Israel.

And it fits quite well. So the here are the guardians of Israel as it were shown to us in this metaphor of the shepherds.

[27:06] And they're keeping watch. Good for them. That's what they're supposed to be doing. That's a good positive thing. They're keeping watch. They're looking after the flock of God diligently, carefully, and of course their job is to watch over the flock until the owner of the flock returns.

They're supposed to watch waiting for the king. Have any of you read or seen Lord of the Rings? Just you and me? Three of us? Four of us? A few more? Do you know, do you remember, this might be stretching your memory, the stewards of Gondor?

And their job was to look after Gondor until the return of the king. And Tolkien called one of the books the return of the king, didn't he? And the king was Aragorn, son of Arathorn.

I'm sorry if you haven't seen Lord of the Rings, but I really like that story. And the job of the steward of the city was to keep everything intact, waiting for the king's return.

He went mad. He didn't do it. He didn't do what he was supposed to do. And here in this picture, the stewards, the shepherds, the guardians, while it's still night, they're still looking after the flock.

[28:24] The dawn hasn't come yet. They're still looking after the flock. But when they get this news, they respond. When God says the king is there, they say, yeah, let's check it out.

And they check it out and they're positive about it and they take it on board and they tell other people and the whole thing is exemplary.

They're alert, responsive. They find the actions they take are confirmed. They rejoice. They spread the word. And that's a correct example. That's what ought to happen.

Now, you will, many of you will know that in the life of Jesus, this whole thought was worked out in considerable complexity.

But by and large, that's what didn't happen in Jesus' life. The shepherds who were supposed to open, sorry, the watchmen who were supposed to open the flock for the sheepfold for the shepherd did not do so.

[29:32] Actually, they killed the shepherd. That's what's not supposed to happen. What the shepherds did in this story is what's supposed to happen. It's a correct example, and therefore an example to us.

So maybe you would say in a sense in your life you've just been waiting for the light to dawn. And you've been hanging on to doing things as best you can while it's still night.

But the dawn hasn't come yet, and you need the dawn to come into your life. You need the sun of righteousness as he's described to arise in you.

And you want that. That's what you need. You know that. And here's the example of the shepherds as exactly the example for us. When they heard this news, this is in a sense what they've been waiting for in that sense, and they responded positively.

And the way they did it was to take one step at a time. And the step that they took first was, well, the angel said there's a baby born just down the road, and we will recognize that because he'll be swaddled up lying in a manger.

[30:52] Let's stop what we're doing. Let's go straight down there and check that out. And in taking that step of faith, because it was a step

of faith, wasn't it?

It wasn't a step of irrationality, but it was a step of believing. We'll take what the angels have said on trust, and we'll go and see.

It was very literally a step of faith. Not a step of irrationality, but trusting the bit that they had got to see whether it worked.

And it did work. And that's the way faith operates. That's how we come to certainty about Jesus Christ. By taking what we have got, taking steps of faith to check that out, and then taking it on from there.

There's usually another step of faith after that, and then another step of faith after that. And it's sort of like a spiral of certainty which brings you into the middle. And this nice story says how faith operates, and it's an invitation to us.

[32:06] Would you like to do that? Would you like to get into the central bit where the light has dawned, and where the night is over, and the waiting is over?

And the shepherds give us an example of how to do that. They get their proof, as it were, as they begin to take steps of faith. Well, I haven't said everything in the story, but it is an inviting story. It says, would you like that? It's a positive example of how it's all supposed to work. Would you like to do that? Would you like to do that? There are steps of faith that I'm sure you could take, probably involving reading on what Luke has to say, probably involving getting yourself with the people of God regularly, maybe getting somebody to read the Bible with you, all sorts of things like that, are the sorts of steps that God uses.

So let's sum up then. It's a nice story. It's a story of childing a child, giving birth to a son. It's a positive story. It moves from fear to great joy.

The shadow of death is not absent. But if you were to get to know the story in its entirety, you would come to understand that the death of Jesus is actually the best part.

[33:33] Very strange. What he achieved in his death crowns what he achieved by his coming into this world.

And what he achieved by his death is the very strongest and most powerful part. of the good news that the angel told us of. And the way to find that out is just to take those steps and you'll find the story invites us to do so.

And I hope that each of us will be like the shepherds and accept the invitation that the angel gives. Let's close by singing number 376.

turn together. turn together. turn Let's turn together. turn turn together. turn together. Let's turn