

The Birth of Christ

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[0 : 00] I think it goes without saying that we all come to this text and run the risk of approaching it in familiar ways.

The only event of significance on this earth that attracted a host of angels who praised God, saying glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased.

And the truth is that only the angels really understood that night what was happening. And they understood it in a way that we, unless the Lord tells us in heaven, we'll never know.

But there's much that is revealed in God's word that we can understand about what was going on in the birth of Christ. And if we partly understand that, it will ignite our hearts to sing even louder than we sang this morning.

We sang this morning. It's good to hear voices being joined together in singing. But if we understand what happened when Jesus Christ was born, we'd sing our own song to God.

[1 : 38] So let's read together this account from Luke's gospel of the Savior's birth. And I trust the Lord will open all of our hearts and eyes to the significance of this event in salvation history.

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[3 : 39] Luke chapter 2, begin in verse 1. Luke chapter 2, begin in verse 1. Luke chapter 2, begin in verse 1. chewing chewing chewing chewing chewing chewing chewing chewing chewing for all the people. 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.

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest. And on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased.

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.

It's the Lord has made known to us. 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.

[4 : 46] But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen as it had been told them.

And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

Let's pray together. Father, we are grateful this morning that we're able to gather in this place. And Lord, in many ways, it is a refuge from a busy and a distracted world.

And Father, we come to your word this morning, a story that most of us have heard time and time again. And so we ask that you would grant us fresh eyes to approach this passage.

And Lord, grant us open hearts to hear you speak to us about the same old story, but in a no less convicting way than the first time we heard it and we understood the truth of Jesus Christ coming into the world.

[6 : 12] Lord, would you help us, Lord, in this moment to have undivided hearts and undistracted hearts. Would you speak to us, Lord, in ways that only you can.

In Jesus' name. Amen. From the very outset of his gospel, it is very clear that Luke is both a careful historian and a faithful theologian.

Luke wrote his gospel account with a commitment to a historical accuracy and to theological faithfulness because he wanted Theophilus, the one to whom he wrote this gospel, to be certain about the things that he was taught.

He wanted him to have certainty. And the same benefit that Luke intended for Theophilus, we can have this morning about what we have been taught about Jesus Christ.

As we consider this passage of Scripture this morning, what we see in it, when we see it, is quite amazing. What we see in these verses is that the birth of Christ is a compelling drama of God's sovereignty and a comforting display of God's grace.

[7 : 40] That's what we see in this old story that we've heard time and time again told, that we've seen dramatized.

In this story, is a compelling drama of God's sovereignty and a comforting display of God's grace. Put it another way, in Luke's account of the birth of Christ, we see God demonstrating his sovereignty and displaying his grace.

So this morning, as we consider this account of the birth of Christ, I've organized my thoughts under two headings, and they are, number one, a compelling drama of God's sovereignty.

We see that in verses one through seven and a comforting display of God's grace. We see that in verses eight through 21. So let's first consider a compelling drama of God's sovereignty.

At first glance, this account doesn't show anything that's compelling about the sovereignty of God. Instead, what we see is a powerful emperor by the name of Caesar Augustus who was ordering people around and telling them to return to their town of origin to be registered, something that was generally done when you were going to be taxed.

[9 : 04] Caesar Augustus was the ruler over the vast Roman Empire, which was synonymous with the world. And he ruled by autocratic decree, not by democratic resolution.

And Luke helps us to see from the very outset of this account of the birth of Christ that this was an entrenched, powerful ruler.

And exactly who was Caesar Augustus? Caesar Augustus' actual name was Gaius Octavius. He was the great nephew of Julius Caesar.

He was a ruthless warrior and he fought his way to the top as emperor of the Roman Empire. Within the Roman Empire, the emperors were considered to be gods and they were worshipped as such. But Octavius went beyond what all the other Roman emperors had done prior to his time. About 25 years before Jesus was born, Octavius received from the Roman Senate the title Augustus, which means holy or revered one.

[10 : 22] Which before was exclusively used for gods. Octavius received this title unto himself and it communicated that he possessed divine qualities.

historians tell us that Octavius permitted the worship of various powers claimed to be operating through him. For example, the powers of peace, victory, liberty, and security.

Augustus received titles such as Savior. He was revered as the one who brought peace to the Roman world. He was considered to be a son of a deity and as such he was called the son of God. And when he died, Roman citizens comforted themselves by their belief that he really wasn't dead because he was a god and gods don't die. So that's who Octavius was.

He's the same Caesar Augustus that Luke refers to in verse 1. Although Caesar Augustus died in AD 14 and Luke was writing approximately 45 years after he died, the office would have known who Caesar Augustus was just because of all that he was credited for in the Roman Empire.

[11 : 47] For example, in our country today, when the name Lyndon B. Johnson is mentioned, those who have been, those who have lived since his death, and I would dare say those who would be alive and would hear his name for hundreds of years perhaps later if we continue with teaching history will probably recognize him and there will be certain historical political realities that will come to mind.

But the same is true with Caesar Augustus. When the office would have heard this name, he would have no doubt been able to know who this man was, know the history about him and be able to make some connections and see how God was sovereignly at work in the birth of Christ when Caesar was emperor.

So when we put it all together, what we see is that Caesar issued this decree for all the Roman world to be taxed or registered and people were required to go to their respective cities to be registered.

So Joseph went to Bethlehem, the city of David, and we're told in verse 6 that while they were there, the time came for Mary to give birth.

And in verse 7, we're told that she gave birth to a firstborn son and she wrapped him in swaddling cloths, which really was not a warm blanket as such, it was more just strips of cloth to keep the body straight and laid him in a manger.

[13:29] That manger really was an animal's feeding trough. That's what it was where Jesus was born because we're told there was no room in the end. So in these seven verses, what we see is that Luke the historian, Luke the theologian, is recording the details of the birth of Christ in such a way that we would be able to see the divine implications of his birth.

In this section of this account of the birth of Christ, we're able to see this compelling drama of the sovereignty of God. First of all, we see God's sovereignty in when Jesus was born.

He was born at a time when there was an imposter God by the name of Caesar Augustus, ruling the world, ordering people around, giving decrees, and all the time that he was doing this, God was sovereignly using him to bring his purposes to pass.

Just think about that. Jesus is born at a time when Caesar Augustus, was a mere man parading around to be God, and God sovereignly ordained it that the one true God in human flesh, Jesus Christ, would be born into the world.

And he so moves upon Caesar to issue this decree to cause people to go to their respective cities. And Jesus goes, not Jesus, but Joseph goes to Bethlehem, the place where the prophets prophesied that the Messiah is going to be born.

[15:19] God chose to send the true Savior into the world in the person of Jesus Christ at the time when there was a false Savior in the person of Caesar Augustus, at a time when a false Savior was offering a false sense of salvation, a political salvation from national enemies God sent Jesus, the true Savior, to bring spiritual salvation from ultimate enemies, the enemies of Satan and sin.

You see, Octavius was Savior by a Senate resolution at age 40. Jesus was Savior by Heaven's Declaration salvation from the time of his birth.

The world had a sense of false peace, peace that they credited to Caesar Augustus, but a peace that was brought about by ruthless submission.

God sent the true peace into the world through the Prince of Peace, Jesus Christ, who alone offers the peace that this world needs. He alone offers the peace that brings reconciliation between God and man and between man and man.

And it's not a false peace. It's a true peace. But if someone was interviewing Augustus and said to him, well, why did you do that? Why did you issue those decrees?

[16:55] He would have said, because I wanted to. no doubt he would not have attributed it to God, yet the sovereign Lord was at work in the midst of all that was going on, in the midst of his decree, bringing his purposes to pass.

But not only do we see the compelling drama of God's sovereignty and when Jesus was born, again, we see it in where Jesus was born. 750 years prior to the birth of Christ, God spoke through the prophet Micah who prophesied that the Messiah would be born in an insignificant town called Bethlehem.

This prophecy is in Micah 5 and 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 the ruler, in Israel, whose origin is from old, from ancient days.

I'm sure like me, you have met people who take great pride in the city they were born in or the city that they live in. They are proud to tell you, well, I was born in Los Angeles.

I was born in New York. I was born in London. I was born in Paris. And if you're from settlement like Mangrove Key or Snug Corner Acklands, you want to change the conversation quickly.

[18:34] And really, the same would have been true at the time of the birth of Christ. Some cities and some towns were more significant than others, and Bethlehem was not a significant city.

city. But that's the city where God chose for the Savior of the world to be born. So Christ's birth in this obscure town of Bethlehem was not by accident.

It was not by coincidence. It was by divine design by a sovereign God. God prophesied it and at the right time he brought it to pass, even though it looked like a political tyrant was in control of it all. And brothers and sisters, this is instructive for us this morning. Above the circumstances of our lives, we can be comforted this morning in knowing that there's a sovereign God to whom even tyrants are subject.

In the midst of them acting like God and throwing their weight around, there's a true sovereign God who is at work, bringing his purposes to pass and even using their arrogant abuse of power in the process.

[19 : 52] And this is true whether it is a prime minister, whether it's a boss who's the tyrant, whether it's your husband, whether it's your father, it is still true that there's a sovereign God over them.

And because God is sovereign, we can trust him. Because God is sovereign, we must trust him. You may be walking this morning through hardship, contradictory hardship like Mary.

Here she is, she's carrying God's son, she's carrying the savior of the world in her womb and she's being ordered around by this imposter. So let's remember this morning, God is sovereign and he is at work above all the details of our lives and so we can trust him.

I'm reminded of the famous hymn by William Cooper, the hymn God Moves in a Mysterious Way and this is what the second verse says, O fearful saints, new courage take, the clouds that you now dread are big with mercy and will break in blessings on your head.

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, but trust him for his grace. Behind a frowning providence he hides a smiling face.

[21 : 15] Brothers and sisters, this morning, let us not judge the Lord by feeble sense, let us trust him for his grace. Behind a frowning providence he hides a smiling face.

Some of you young people this morning, no doubt you wonder about your life and your future as an adult. You wonder what will it be like?

Will I go to college? Will I finish college? What kind of job will I have? Will I be safe? What about marriage? Where will I live? And there are those of us this morning who are wondering about events that we know will take place but we don't know when and we don't know how.

And here we are just days away from another year, another new year, and we don't know what it holds for us. We don't know, we did not know what this year held for us and we only met it and in many ways we were surprised by what we met.

on Friday night I was at the hospital with Bernal and Jan and as I sat I was just struck by how suddenly things can happen and how we just never plan events to happen at particular times and so while we are preparing to celebrate Christmas, here they are finding themselves at the emergency room and I reminded them that there is a sovereign God above it all.

[22 : 59] The timing may seem often odd to us but there is a sovereign God over all who knows what will happen, who knows when it will happen and everything happens under the umbrella of his sovereignty.

Everything happens under his sovereign power and control and ultimately he orders and ordains all that comes to pass.

And even where we don't understand we can trust because he is sovereign. We can trust this God who compellingly dramatized his sovereignty in the birth of Christ.

Have you ever wondered why Jesus was born in a manger? Have you really thought about that? I mean the story is there was no room in the inn and that's humanly speaking true.

That is true. I see Abby thought I was asking a question. She wanted to raise her hand. Abby, why was Jesus born in the manger? There was no room in the inn.

[24 : 08] And that is what scripture says. That is what scripture says. But you know, that is in a human sense true but in a divine sense not true.

If the sovereign God of the universe desired Jesus to be born in the palace of Caesar, he could have brought it to pass. But it was God's plan and God's design to have his son enter into the world in the exact way that he did.

It was all by divine design. And what a contrast it was that night. Here it is the false savior of the world, the false son of God, is parading around with pomp and pageantry and power and the true son of God, the true savior of the world, the true prince of peace, is helplessly laying in a feeding trough in a squalid stable steeped in the scent of animals, manure, and urine.

And it was all by design. The God of the universe so ordered that it would be. And it helps us to see that the God of the universe was not then and is not now appealing to human pride.

Brothers and sisters, the only thing worse than the squalor of the stable is the scandal of the cross where Jesus would hang helplessly and naked before a gazing crowd, bearing our sin, bearing our shame, and paying the price of our rebellion.

[25 : 57] So why was he born there? He was ultimately born there by divine design. And here again we need to be instructed by where Christ was born.

When we are tempted to impress the world, when we are tempted to impress the world with what we know and what we have and what we do, we want to belong to God.

We want to belong to God. We identify with God and we embrace, joyfully embrace the lowliness of the Savior's birth and all the humility that it communicates.

the writer to the Hebrews says about Moses in Hebrews 11 24, by faith Moses when he was grown up refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin.

He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt while he was looking to a reward. And how about you this morning? where do you identify most?

[27 : 10] Are you in humility identifying with the squalor of the stable or are you in pride identifying with the glitter of the world? There's no getting away from the humble origins of our faith and those who seek to make Christianity more attractive offer a counterfeit faith.

God's And so Luke's account of the birth of Christ communicates a compelling drama of God's sovereignty because it helps us to see that when Christ was born and where Christ was born were all ordained by a sovereign God.

But not only does Luke in his account communicate this compelling drama of God's sovereignty he also communicates a comforting display of God's grace.

And this is my second and final point. Luke helps us to see this comforting display of God's grace through the angels appearing to the shepherds in verse 8.

We're told in verse 8 in the same region there were shepherds out in the field watching keeping watch over their flock by night. at night when everybody else was safely indoors these humble shepherds were out in the field watching over a flock that didn't belong to them.

[28 : 46] We're told in verse 9 that the Lord had an angel to appear to them to tell them of the Savior's birth. You see in verse 10 the angel calls the good news of great joy that would be for all people for unto you is born this day a Savior who is Christ the Lord.

Notice how Jesus is referred to. He's referred to by three titles. The first one is Savior. This is a salvation word and it immediately communicates to us who Jesus is and what he came to do. He is a Savior who came to save. And also communicates to us our condition, our lost condition that we need a Savior, that we need to be delivered from sin and Satan and we also need to be delivered from the wrath of God.

And it's so easy to overlook that part of the saving work of Jesus Christ. It is not just to save from sin and save from Satan. It is also to save from the coming wrath.

So the Bible says there is coming a wrath of God to be poured out upon all unrepentant sinners. The second title that we see is Christ.

[30 : 09] It means Messiah or anointed one. This title calls to mind the Old Testament kings and priests and how they were anointed with oil as a sign of being consecrated to a particular mission in life.

being sinners like those whom they were serving all of those kings and all of those priests.

They failed. And God had promised that he would send a Messiah. He would send a Messiah, an anointed king, an anointed priest who would not fail. But back then every time there was a priest that failed or there was a king that failed.

It was a reminder of the promise that God would send a Messiah. He would send a king who would not fail. He would send a priest who would not fail.

And that night in Bethlehem, the time had finally come, the angel proclaimed this promise that God gave that he would send a Messiah, an unfailing king, an unfailing priest.

[31 : 17] It had finally come that night. And then the third title is the title Lord. And this title points to the deity of Jesus Christ.

It points to his sovereign rule over our lives. Jesus is the Lord God. And here in verse 8, for the first time in scripture, we have the words Christ and Lord joined together, brought together, meaning that Jesus was the Lord Christ.

Jesus was God in the flesh. Jesus was Emmanuel, which means God with us. And this is the good news for all people. God has sent his son to take on human flesh to be the savior of all people. So why is the angel's appearance to the shepherds a display of the grace of God? Why? Why is that a gracious display by God?

Well, to appreciate how gracious this display was with angels coming to these shepherds, you have to appreciate and understand the place that shepherds held in Jewish society.

[32 : 35] Shepherds were considered the lowest in society. The only people lower than shepherds were lepers, the outcasts, those who could not associate with others.

shepherds were so disdained that they could not, by Jewish law, be allowed to give testimony in court because they were considered liars and thieves.

And broadly that marked them because they didn't own the sheep and when danger would come they would run off and leave the sheep and they would steal where they could steal and so they were generally considered unreliable.

They were considered untrustworthy. they were the outcasts. They were the nobodies. I was thinking about this and I think we have an example of how we can have outcasts or we can have particular jobs that are so below us because of our own history and how they are particular tasks that some of us think that we ought not do and we shouldn't do.

Well, the shepherds were like that. Those who did that kind of work, they were the lowest of the low in society. And yet when the sovereign God of the universe chose whom he would first send the angel to share this good news of great joy to all people, he said, go to the shepherds.

[34 : 11] go to the shepherds. He chooses the lowest of the low in society, shepherds, to hear the good news that God had broken into human history to bring mercy and grace into a fallen and broken world.

Why didn't he tell the innkeeper? Why didn't he tell the people in the rooms in the inn? that Mary and Joseph could not get in?

Why didn't he tell Caesar's household? He didn't choose to tell them. Instead, he told shepherds. And in so doing, he displayed the nature of grace that it comes to the undeserving. It comes to the undeserving.

the church is a startling occurrence that we must not overlook. Because of the status of the shepherds, they would have been pleased if a human being had come to them to tell them that the Savior was born after everybody else had heard.

[35 : 32] If someone had just come and told them after everyone else had heard, because of their status in society, because of the role that they had come to play in society and how they were seen in society, they would have been happy.

But God did more, so much more. He sends an angel to the shepherds and they were the first to hear. And what we see is we see an example of what Mary sang about in her song. mighty Caesar Augustus brought low and the lowly shepherds exalted. It's a display of God's grace. The unexpected, the undeserving received and the entitled passed over. In verse 14 we see the angel's song, the song that they sang, which we call the Gloria in Altissimus. And the words of the song accent the grace of God. Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased.

[36 : 46] And here we see God's divine initiative, not just with the shepherds but also with those on whom his favor rests.

God's peace comes to and among those who are the recipients of his grace. And let's remember that no human can ever please God.

It is only by grace. And so for us this morning this compelling display of God's grace to the shepherd should remind us, should remind all of us that no one is beyond the reach of God's grace. it should remind us this morning that no matter how sinful, no matter how shameful we or our sins might be, God's grace can reach us. God's grace can forgive us.

Again, notice that God is not impressed with the world, nor is he impressed at trying to seek to impress the world. Because he uses shepherds as the first evangelists, people who that society wouldn't have believed.

[37 : 58] They wouldn't believe their testimony, so they're coming to say, hey, there's a Savior born. If God was really concerned about the world and what the world thinks, he wouldn't send untrustworthy shepherds to be the first evangelists of the good news that the Savior is born.

The shepherds heard the good news from the angels and believed. And this morning, we're all hearing the good news.

We're hearing the good news from God's word. And the question is, do you believe? Do you believe the good news that a Savior has been born into the world?

And that this Savior communicates our true need. He sent us a Savior because we are in need of being saved.

Luke helps us to see in verse 21 that the word that was given to Mary, but the son that she was going to have, the name that he should have, that it was fulfilled.

[39 : 32] he wants the office to see that. He wants us to see that. On the eighth day, the day when baby boys were circumcised, Mary's son was named Jesus, the name that Gabriel said he would have.

Brothers and sisters, the angelic host praised God and sang about God's divine initiative of the Savior coming into the world in the person of Jesus Christ.

It communicates a need for rescue. And if you have not been rescued through coming to a place of personal faith in Jesus Christ, what better time than now to reflect on your own need for salvation and to reflect on the message of the gospel that has come to us and put your own faith in Jesus Christ.

And that what we're talking about this morning, what Luke recorded is not a fable, didn't happen in a corner somewhere. Luke recorded these things at a time when there would have been people who could have refuted what he said.

But Luke was a historian. But more than that, he was a theologian. And he's helping us to see our need for the Savior. And so my prayer for us this morning is that when we consider the Savior's birth from this account, we will all see this compelling drama of a sovereign God.

[41 : 20] we will also see this comforting display of a gracious God. Let's pray together.