

The Greatest Story

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[0 : 00] I'm not sure that it makes a lot of difference, but I'm trying to get my watch where I can see it.

! Let's begin with prayer. Our Father God, this morning as we open Your Word, we're mindful that it is settled in the heavens, that it is truth.

It is that which is profitable that the man of God may be completely furnished for all good work. It is the word of life. It is the means whereby we are, first of all, convicted of our sin and drawn to recognize that there is no remedy in ourselves or in our efforts and drawn by Your grace to the cross and understanding that apart from You, we have no good.

We're thankful that we have the Word in hand and that it is the focal point of our attention this morning, both in our singing, that woven through all the songs that we have sung is the beauty of the Scriptures, that as we listen to our pastor pray that we can hear the Word of God resonate in the truth of the prayer.

And then as we take this Word in hand, we're reminded of the fact that it will last forever. We come with frailty, with ambitions and affections that are so easily distracted, and yet with confidence in the enabling of the Spirit of God that this morning we who are Your children would enjoy the privilege of Your work in our lives, that we would have You open the Word, that we would see wonderful truths there, and that, frankly, we would grow to be more like the Lord Jesus Christ and that our ambitions and affections would be focused on eternity rather than here.

[2 : 28] We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. I want you to turn your Bibles this morning to Luke chapter 2. Luke chapter 2.

And as you are going there, I would venture that there are a number of you that, as we look at this passage this morning, would say, Oh, I've heard that before.

I remember that was one of the passages that we read on an annual basis on Christmas Eve or Christmas morning when our family would get together. And it's a passage that's very familiar to you.

I have to tell you that when something is very familiar, there is a natural inclination to kind of, I've heard that before, ain't no big deal, and let it set aside.

And I would appeal to you that you don't go there. That's not right. When the Word of God is opened, the children of God should be actively engaged in appealing to the Spirit who indwells the believer to say this, Lord, open your Word that it might have an effect on me and that my heart might be warmed by the beauty of who you are and what you've done for me.

[3 : 47] And that as a result of my attention to the Word of God, that I would grow in my love for the Lord Jesus Christ and my understanding of the mission that you've called me here for. And I would appeal to you that you who know Christ consciously and deliberately do that.

I think we can multitask, so let me read and you pray with your eyes open. Now that's complicated, but let's give it a shot, okay? Luke chapter 2, beginning there in verse 1.

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria and all went to be registered, each to his own town.

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, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.

And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in the manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

[4 : 58] And in the same region, there were shepherds out in the field keeping watch over their flocks by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear.

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. 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 clothes and lying in a manger. I want us to look at this passage, and as we start into the text, the first thing that I ask that you pay attention to is the setting, because setting is important.

And I want you to recognize that in the early verses that we've looked at, particularly 1 through 7, that the Scripture gives us quite a bit of practical historical detail.

We know who ordered the registration. We know who the governor of Syria was. We know why Joseph and Mary went from the place that they were living at that time to Bethlehem, and we know where Jesus was born.

[6 : 16] Not the exact location, but we know that he was born in a manger. There's a little one over there, right there. So we know the details.

And so I want you to think with me just for a moment about how carefully the Lord sees to it that we are given all the information we need to understand the particulars of this moment.

The Bible is actually quite generous with factual and historical information that is easily double-checked. How many of you as parents have learned that when your children come up from the basement and there's been a little bit of tussle down there and you ask them what happened, the first giveaway that you need to drill down pretty seriously is when they say, nothing, or not much. The fact of the matter is is that generally when there is a conscious and deliberate focus on not giving information, it's because the information that might be forthcoming ends up being indicting.

And so one of the things that I want you to appreciate about the Scripture is that the Scripture is profoundly careful to give you an abundance of information information that you can actually check.

[7 : 43] I remember at one point in my earlier days having a person giving me the Pearl of Great Price. Pearl of Great Price.

Does anybody know what that book is? It is one of the trilogy of Mormon Scriptures and I remember reading about the Lemnites and the whatever else and how there was this wonderful, fantastical community developed out in the Southwest.

And the only difficulty with the entire story is that there is no evidence whatever of its existence. That's not the way it is with the Bible.

When the Bible says something, it can be checked. Now at one point when archaeology was kind of developing as a discipline and an academic skill, there was a time when people would say, well, we don't have any record of, you know, and they would generally speak in their ignorance and their lack of understanding and then slowly, sure enough, someone would find evidence of, well, there was a Caesar Augustus.

Lo and behold, just because we didn't know about him here in the Midwest doesn't mean he didn't exist. And there was an order that taxation should take place and everybody should be registered.

[9 : 04] You can understand why they would do that. They want to know how many people to expect some money from. And we also know who the governor of Syria was and all these little details. And so here, while we have over the years many individuals who have tried to undermine the authority of Scripture by undermining the reality of its accuracy, God has never backed away from telling us what we need to know.

In fact, this is one of the things that I really do like about our God. He doesn't hide what we need to know or what is helpful to us. And I want you to recognize this morning as you sit here under the teaching of the Word of God, no one will ever be able to say in eternity, I didn't know better.

The fact of the matter is, is I was to my, let me see how I say this right. My wife says I say it wrong. Endocrinology, am I right? Kendra, where are you? Wave at me so I get it right.

I went to my doctor. How's that? And my doctor was explaining, just a wealth of medical information and she was advising me on something to do with my disease.

And I thought, I didn't know that before. And if I had known that, probably would have changed some things earlier on in life and probably lived to be a little, maybe another six months. Who knows? You know, so the Bible can't be accused of not giving us all the information we need.

[10 : 33] And if you're sitting there wondering about, how does the story end? What should I be doing today? We find here just an illustration of the fact that the Bible goes out of its way to tell us all that we need.

And so in addition to the historical facts, I want you to recognize that what we're dealing with here is that we find that God chose to bring this announcement of the coming of His Savior, our Savior, His Son, the Messiah.

He made the announcement to shepherds. Now we have kind of idealized shepherds. We think shepherds are the sweetest and nicest thing ever going and you're going to see shepherds tonight that are going to be scared to death when three lovely angels, I think, is it three or four?

I don't know. But anyway, they're going to come out and they're, behold, I'll give you a good tiding. The shepherds are going to fall down. It's well dramatized. But I got to tell you, in real life, shepherds were not the kind of individuals that you would have called on if you wanted to make an important announcement.

And the reason for that is this, is that shepherds were generally very unreliable, irresponsible, and disrespected bunch.

[11 : 51] So much so that in Israel at the time in which this announcement was made, as a general rule, shepherds were not allowed to be witnesses in court.

Now that tells you something, doesn't it? Generally, you know that when you want someone to witness in court, what you're looking for is someone who has an adequate reputation that their words should be believed.

Shepherds had such a lousy reputation that it was generally, hey, we're not just a shepherd to tell us anything. Let it go. And so here, God comes, and He gives the announcement of sending His Son, the Messiah, to shepherds.

Ask yourself the question, why would God do that? Is that a fair question? Why would God send the message of the coming of His Son to shepherds in principle?

Why didn't He choose the religious leaders of the day? Why didn't He emblazon it in the sky, right over the horizon of Jerusalem in particular?

[12 : 56] Hello out there, my Savior, my Son has come. He is the Savior. You better listen to Him. Now by the way, how many of you know that the second time He comes is going to be much more undeniably clear, right?

The first time, without fanfare, sews up to the shepherds, and you have to ask yourself the question, why would God do it this way?

Well, let me give you a little hint as to His purposes. Turn over in your Bible, if you will, to 1 Corinthians 1. 1 Corinthians 1, verse 27 through 31.

Here is the apostle teaching the believers in Corinth some of the basic principles about God in His dealing with us.

There in verse 27, he says, but God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise. He chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong.

[14 : 06] God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being may boast in the presence of God.

And because of Him, you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that as it is written, let the one who boasts boast in God.

I want you to think with me just for a moment why God chose to use the shepherds is because He wanted carefully for no other focus to be attached to the information other than on the news of Christ's coming Himself, and that was it.

He didn't want people arriving and saying, aren't you glad I have come to give you this wonderful news, and I am expected and appreciated, and here I am. You know, it's like, no, shepherds were the ones who were told.

Another interesting detail of God's work in announcing Christ's birth is that the event, ultimately, got lost. And what I mean by that is that it had some momentary traction in the history of Israel, but it soon faded off the page.

[15 : 20] Turn, if you will, you're there in 1 Corinthians, go back to Matthew for a moment, I want you to look at Matthew chapter 2. Let me read the passage to you so you can follow with me here.

Now, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea in the days of Herod, the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem. Now, what happened first? Shepherds, wise men.

Shepherds. And the announcement of the shepherds got kind of what? Oh yeah, so what? No big deal. Shepherds. They said, here come the wise men, saying, where is he who has been born king of the Jews?

For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him. When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled. And by the way, when Herod was troubled, guess what happened to everybody who was near him?

They got troubled. Understandably. It's a little bit like the despot over there in North Korea. When he has a cold, there are lots of people that die as a result of it.

[16:26] He is not a happy man to be around. Herod was like that. And so here we find that Herod was troubled and all of Jerusalem with him. And as a result of his concern or his fear of someone else taking his place, he had just a whole, two years and under, slaughtered.

The children, the men, the boys. And so the thing that I want you to recognize as you're thinking about the story of Christmas is here is the Lord Jesus arriving, born of a virgin, born in a manger. And the fact of the matter is that most everything that happened was just kind of looked over and passed over and people did not pay much attention to it. It reminds me of what we read over in John chapter 1.

Let's go there just for a moment to frame that thought in our minds. John chapter 1 verse 10. He was in the world and the world was made through him yet the world did not know him.

He was in the world. The world was made through him and yet the fact of the matter is the world did not know him. Even though the announcement was made, even though the wise men came, at the end of the day the coming of our Lord Jesus was something that was largely overlooked by almost everyone that heard the news.

[17:47] Without his background I want to dive into the text and think about it a little more carefully because the news that is given there is truly spectacular and has application to each of us here this morning.

Go back, if you will, to Luke chapter 2 and pick up with me there what we read in verse 9. And the angel and an angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them and they were filled with fear.

A little sidebar. And I don't know about you but I recognize certain patterns. I'm old enough to see it happen periodically. Every five to ten years someone decides that it's appropriate to write a book about having been in heaven or having seen God directly.

And very popular and people make a lot of money doing it. 90 minutes in heaven da da da you know the little boy etc. By the way he recanted that in case you didn't know.

But the idea is that you see God and you know kind of get all caught up in this and we don't find that illustration in scripture. Any individual who has come face to face with angelic announcement generally pretty terrified by it.

[19:01] And here are the angels the glory of the Lord shone around them and they were filled with fear. 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.

I want you to listen to this encouragement that the angel brings to the shepherds there in the field. You can understand the terrifying experience that they have but listen to what he says.

He says I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. I want you to think about the exceptional news that good news. I'm not here to give you a great deal of Greek but the word that is used there is the word from which we get the word gospel.

Euangelion Euangelion Euangelion Euangelion Euangelion and it was a word that was often used I shouldn't say often but it was generally used to give political and exceptional announcements unbelievably exceptional announcements.

Case in point when the empire saving battle had been won by one of the Roman generals that was called good news.

[20:11] It had political ramifications and it was something that kind of changed the dynamics. You could imagine that if we heard on April 15th that all of our taxes had been forgiven for the year how many of you would say good news?

Would you say that? Huh? I'm not just talking about your federal taxes I'm talking about your city taxes and blah blah blah all the way down it's like yes! Well the word was used to refer to exceptional moments in history when something of tremendous value and import had happened

and so here's the angel says I have got good news for you.

It's interesting actually that there was a stone carving found somewhere in Turkey in which the following was written about Caesar Augustus. Now who's Caesar Augustus?

Hello? in the text here we go okay and so here's what we read since providence this is what was on the stone carving since providence which has ordered all things and is deeply interested in our life has set in most perfect order by giving us Augustus whom she filled with virtue that he might benefit mankind sending him as a savior both for us and for our descendants that he might end war isn't that a nice thought he might end war and arrange all things and since he Caesar by his appearance surpassing all previous benefactors and not even leaving to posterity any hope of surpassing what he's done now how is that for kind of waxing eloquent right and not even leaving to posterity there will there will never be someone even anywhere close to being as good as him right okay and since the birthday of the god

Augustus was the beginning of the good tidings that's the word euangelio okay since the birthday of the god Augustus was the beginning of good tidings for the world that came by reason of him now who's this talking about a guy who's dust today who did very little to make any difference in anybody's life and here boy that's whoever the speech writer or poet was that did this did a good job you know it's like oh man exceptional news you read that and you think who are they talking about they're talking about a man the angel says I've got really good news good news now the second thing that the angel said he says first it's good news but he said and you mark what it says there it says that is of great joy great joy the word is talking about something that is very emotionally charged the idea is that the news was of such a nature that just hearing it brought on an emotional surge

[23 : 32] I saw a picture last week of a group of workers somewhere in North Carolina that over the years had pooled their money for lottery tickets don't don't do that okay but the the picture was of all these people hugging each other and just crying they were overwhelmed with the prospect I think they won 18 or whatever million dollars and here they were we're so happy you know and they were just beside themselves with the enthusiasm for the good news the emotion here's the angel the angel says I am bringing you good news that is of great joy let me ask you a question how many of you remember what you felt like after you prayed and asked Christ to be your savior and you sensed the freedom and the forgiveness of having all of your sins taken away do you remember that

I was a little boy and I can still remember what it was to listen to my dad having devotions in our family over there in India and I had been in growing conviction for the blackness and darkness of my heart and I reached the point where I was absolutely despairing of my heart's condition and I remember breaking down and crying in devotions and my dad said what's wrong and I shared the burden of my soul and he asked my mom to take me into the room and she explained the gospel further to me and I can remember praying and asking Christ to save me and I can remember the incredible sense of having my sins forgiven that's great news and great news of unbelievable joy and so here's the angel who brings exceptional news the angel who brings this emotional news but also the angel that brings this news about the fact that this is valuable for the whole world listen to what it says in the passage it says here today is born

I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people all the people not just for the people there in Bethlehem not just for the people there in Jerusalem not just for the people in the nation of Israel but good news for all of the people all across the world will you turn with me just for a moment back to a passage in Genesis chapter 12 go back there if you will Genesis chapter 12 take a look at that text in Genesis chapter 12 we find God giving the Abrahamic covenant to Abraham and listen to what he has to say verse 3 I will bless those who bless you and him who dishonors you I will curse and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed how is that because through Abraham's seed would come the savior of the world the one who God would send to be our savior and the one who God would send to die for us and to pay the penalty for our sins that we might have salvation through his finished work and that was the good news that the angel brought valuable not only to shepherds but valuable to the entire world that's one of the reasons why we engage in missions work isn't that right we want other people to know the good news we want other people to know the blessing of complete forgiveness for all of their sins and it is woven in to our daily life and to our prayer and to our interest what is it that I can do to draw attention to the need that only Jesus can answer and to Jesus who is the solution for the deepest needs of every man

well let's look at the cause for the great joy going back there to Luke chapter 2 mark what it says there for here's the reason for unto you is born this day in the city of David a savior who is Christ the Lord as you think about the cause for great joy I want you to recognize first of all God keeps his promises God keeps his promises when he says for unto you is born this day in the city of David a savior who is Christ the Lord God has kept his promise I want you to think with me just for a moment don't need to turn to it but go back if you will in your thinking back to Genesis chapter 3 after Adam and Eve sinned God comes on and speaks with them and what does he promise the day is coming when the one who will bruise Satan's head will come and that is the first reference to the fact that God would provide a savior who would come through flesh to be our redeemer and so here we have woven into the very beginning of the gospel testimony the Bible's record of the work of God on behalf of fallen mankind we find God says I will send a savior who will come by birth and he is going to be a blessing and the one who redeems you woven throughout the [29 : 16] Old Testament record over and over again there are little illusions little statements made about the fact that the day is coming when God would send the Messiah and he would be born of a virgin Mary over there in Isaiah and the picture plays out for us such that when Herod asked so where is he going to be born they could identify his fact the fact that he was going to be born in the city of Bethlehem and recognize this is according to prophecy so I want you to recognize that if God can be trusted to keep his promise in the past will he keep his promise in the future what's the answer how many of you are trusting his promises today or are profoundly anxious living a life that is not resting upon the certainty of what he has done and what he has promised to do God calls us as his people in particular to be people who live in the light of his promises who live in the light of the certainty of his return I want you to recognize something else we find that God provided a savior in the passage it says unto you is born this day in the city of

David a savior who is Christ the Lord last week had the opportunity to talk with several individuals just the course of having lunch with them and not not individuals who part of our fellowship and in the course of conversation we pretty much finished up the meal and I say let me ask you a question they had shared that they go to church every Sunday morning every Sunday morning I said so let me ask you a question if you were to die how many of you know this question is coming right if you were to die tonight and God were to ask you why he should let you into heaven what would you say now we're talking about people who had already confessed we go to church every Sunday morning never miss I said so God asked you why he should let you in what would you say there are actually four sitting there and one who had already told me they didn't go to church at all he young guy he said to the two older guys he said that's a good question yeah I said so what would you say one guy says I I don't know I don't know what I would say I'm trying my best how many of you really think you're trying your best look up at me and say I'm trying my best don't raise your hand okay you're not in that crowd the other guy says I I don't know what to say so they had just also told me about their their families and their wife and I said so your wife and you get married in the church and as you're walking down after the ceremony your wife says to you are we married and you say I don't know I don't know I said I got to tell you something about the God that I know he is very clear about the things I need to know and the scriptures make it undeniably clear that I can't save myself and that God sent his son to be my savior so when we think about that little word savior I want you to recognize several truths about that for one it tells us that we have a need for help from outside ourselves do you follow that why do I need a savior because I can't do it myself the second fact that I want you to focus on here is that the reality of the truth is that there is a cancer on the soul of every living person that makes it impossible for them to save themselves sin has so corrupted our mind and our logic that even in the best of our deeds there is a tincture that is deeply offensive to God and there is no work of righteousness that any man may do that will ever endure him to God you cannot save yourself and the thing that I want you to recognize here is that this fact of salvation that God makes very clear in this passage is a salvation that is certain because of who has done the work listen to the verse again it says for unto you is born this day in the city of

David a savior who is Christ the Lord I love the fact that woven into the beauty of the gospel is the absolute certainty of the eternal destiny of the one who believes in Lord Jesus why not because man saves himself but but salvation is the work of God and here is the angel declaring to those poor shepherds I want to tell you something that God has sent his son to be the savior of the world one other thing that I want you to mark here in this passage is that God has taken on human flesh

verse 12 and this will be a sign for you you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger you know I think I think something this fantastic tends to stretch our mind to the point that we just kind of zone out and don't really think about it very often God the infinite holy creator of this universe chose to take upon himself human flesh and to be among us to live to suffer to die and if the reality of Christ becoming flesh in the incarnation is not one that kind of first of all just kind of overwhelms you and then secondly just fills you with thanksgiving my appeal to you would be this that you need to think more carefully about that fact God in his love for us and in his sensitivity to our frailty was willing to send his son to come here and live on this earth and to die and to rise again and for all eternity to abide and dwell in flesh with us so as we look at this passage in closing I want you to recognize that this tells us a historical fact of about 2,000 some years ago right it's a fact God sent his son the Lord Jesus Christ in keeping with promises he had made centuries millenniums in the past and we who sit here today who know the Lord Jesus

Christ have the blessing of being able to celebrate look forward to his birth and and just celebrate that fact with with confidence and joy in the fact that we who know Christ have had all our sins forgiven and we are looking forward to eternity when we are going to see him face to face I have no doubt there are some of you here today that don't know Christ you may have grown up in a church you may have been like me and had a good devotional life your parents read the Bible to you you heard the Sunday school stories but the fact the matter is is you've never come to grips with the sin in your heart and you've never asked Christ to be your Savior I would be remiss if this morning in the face of the sweetness of the gospel I did not plead with you to confess your sins and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ in whom alone is salvation you see the reason Jesus came is because we can't save ourselves and all you have in front of you is the undeniable record of your inability to do that which is of eternal significance you can't change who you are but God sent his son the [37 : 48] Lord Jesus Christ to pay the penalty for your sins and to grant you salvation through faith in him and I would plead with you you do that now let's bow our heads and pray our precious father we are thankful this morning for the sweetness of the gospel that makes it clear to us that you sent the Lord Jesus Christ to be our Savior he came here to this earth he lived among us he died for our sins and rose again that all who believe in him might have everlasting life and I would plead with you this morning that those of us who are here today that know Christ would have our hearts lifted up and encouraged to recognize you have done a great thing for us that we could not do that our thank you to you is live a life that is marked by holiness in my humility by a genuine affection and interest in the well-being of those who don't know the Lord Jesus Christ and those who are part of the family of

God I pray for those that are here today that do not know you some who have grown up in homes where they've heard the Bible they've heard the scriptures they have had Sunday school in Awana and the fact of the matter is is their hearts are stone cold to you this morning because they've never come to faith I would plead with you that you and your mercy would draw them to the cross that they would confess their sins and believe on Christ that they would humble themselves and cry out for salvation today I ask this in Jesus name amen