

THE ANGEL OF THE LORD AND MARY

Luke 1:26-38

Intro: I don't know how many times I have heard people say that Christmas seems to have come quicker this year than in the past. Of course, that is not true. Time is moving at the same rate as always, but perhaps it is because of the busyness of life that it seems to have come on us faster than usual. Whatever the reason may be, we just have this Sunday and next Sunday before Christmas Day. Christmas Day has largely become a commercial holiday when merchants expect to do the greatest percentage of their business for the whole year. But it is supposed to be a day when we remember the birth of Jesus Christ Who was born in Bethlehem almost two thousand years ago.

We have no proof at all that our Lord was born on the twenty-fifth day of December. In fact, we have no proof that He was born in December. After December 25 was chosen it was learned that this was the rainy season in Israel, and it is very unlikely that the shepherds would have been in the fields with their sheep at that time. But evidence of the celebration of the birth of Christ goes back into the early 300's after Christ, but it was in the year A. D. 354 that December 25 became the official day.

The fact that Christ has almost been forgotten in our country throughout the year, fits in with the little that is made of Him at Christmas. But this does give us who know the Lord an opportunity to tell the old, old story of Christ in an increasingly pagan nation like ours is becoming—or maybe I should say, “has become.” So with just today and next Sunday the only two Sundays we have before Christmas, and with next Sunday night set apart for the observance of the Lord's Supper, I have decided to bring a short series of messages relating to the birth of our Lord. And I am going to do what I don't usually do: I am going to include tonight in the series. So let me tell you what I am going to do—and I have never done this before.

I am going to speak this morning on *The Angel of the Lord and Mary*, from Luke 1. Tonight I plan to speak on *The Angel of the Lord and Joseph* from Matthew 1. And next Sunday morning I will conclude the series speaking on *The Angel of the Lord and the Shepherd* from Luke 2.

Recently as I was thinking of the accounts given in the Gospels of the birth of our Lord, it occurred to me that an angel had a vital part in announcing our Lord's birth to Mary, to Joseph, and to the shepherds. Of

course, this was true also of the birth of John the Baptist when “an angel of the Lord” appeared to Zacharias who was to become the father of the forerunner of our Lord. But I am limiting my messages to those incidents which refer directly to the birth of Christ. And so I am beginning today with *The Angel of the Lord and Mary*, and my text is Luke 1:26-38.

We are told in Luke 1:19 that it was the angel Gabriel who appeared to Zacharias to announce to him that he was going to have a son. And it was the same angel who appeared to Mary, according to Luke 1:26. These are the only two times in the NT that the angel Gabriel is mentioned by name, but I am inclined to think that he was the angel who appeared to Joseph and the Shepherds. I can't prove that, but it seems very likely that Gabriel was the divinely appointed messenger who came to all of these individuals. At any rate, we know it was Gabriel who appeared to Mary, and we can only assume that it was also Gabriel who appeared to Joseph and the Shepherds.

The passage has been read to us, and so let me begin by pointing out that the angel Gabriel's appearance to Mary was:

I. A SUDDEN, UNEXPECTED APPEARANCE (Luke 1:26-27).

We read much about angels in the Bible. In fact, the Bible is the only authoritative source of information that we have about angels. Always examine by Scripture everything that you hear about angels today, and if it doesn't accord with Scripture, don't believe it. Angels are spirit beings, created on a higher level than human beings, but capable of becoming visible, and even of appearing sometimes as human beings.

But one thing that was unusual about Gabriel's appearance to Zacharias, and then to Mary, is that, as far as Scripture is concerned, it had been approximately 400 years since God had last spoken through a prophet. That is why we speak of “four hundred silent years” between the OT and the NT. It was in Jerusalem that Gabriel appear to Zacharias with the message that he and his wife Elisabeth were to become parents, but it was in northern Israel, in Nazareth, that Gabriel appeared to Mary. And yet I think that we can safely assume that Mary did not know at this point what had happened to Zacharias, nor did she knew that her cousin Elisabeth was going to have a child. But she would know about Elisabeth before Gabriel was through speaking with her. Nevertheless Mary had no reason to expect that the angel of the Lord was going to appear to her with the message that he had for her. We are told in verse 26 that it was “in the

sixth month” that Gabriel appeared to Mary, and this means six months since Elisabeth realized in herself that she was going to become a mother. This is how we know that John the Baptist was six months older than our Lord.

One big difference between Elisabeth, besides the fact that Elisabeth was much older than Mary, was the point that Elisabeth was married to Zacharias, but Mary was not married, and never had been married. But our KJV says that she was “espoused to a man whose name was Joseph.” This means that they were engaged to be married, but not married. And, although there was practically no attention paid to the royal family in Israel in those days, it is stated here that Joseph had royal blood in his veins. He was “of the house of David.” Mary had been promised in marriage to Joseph, but the marriage had not taken place.

II. GABRIEL’S MESSAGE (Luke 1:28-33).

As the angel Gabriel appeared, Mary had no idea why he had come to her. The word “angel” means *a messenger*. She undoubtedly knew that angels came from God to bring messages to people on earth, but beyond that she expected nothing, and knew nothing. But the angel was not long in telling her why he had come.

The first part of his message was this: “Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women” (Luke 1:28). To be “highly favored” meant that she had been “endued with grace.” She was literally *compassed about with the grace of God*. This word does not mean that she was sinless. In fact, it means the opposite. However, Mary had kept herself pure by God’s grace, and God was about to bestow upon Mary an honor by grace which no other woman had ever received, nor will any woman ever receive such an honor again. “The Lord is with thee” is a statement indicating that God had set her apart for a very unique place in life. The statement, “Blessed art thou among women,” does not appear here in the best MSS, but it does belong in verse 42 where it was said by Elisabeth about Mary. No woman had ever been honored like Mary was about to be honored although many women have had special places of blessing in the plans and purposes of God. *What the angel was about to tell Mary was the honor of all honors for a woman.*

Notice her reaction in verse 29. She was “troubled at his saying.” Robertson says that she was both puzzled and upset, and for her to “cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be” means that she was

tossing around in her mind several possibilities as to what Gabriel meant. But we can doubt if she really expected to hear what Gabriel was about to say.

— Gabriel knew that she was afraid, perhaps even somewhat terrified by this sudden turn of events. And so he sought to calm her fears by telling her not to be afraid but to realize that she was being blessed with a special evidence, a very special evidence, of the grace of God. The word for “favor” is the Greek word for *grace*. *Thus in verse 28 where we have the words “highly favoured,” and here in verse 30 where we have the word “favour,” we have strong evidence that what God was preparing to do through Mary was not because she deserved it, but because of the grace of God.*

This is an answer to all of those who would deify the virgin Mary. She was not immaculately conceived, as our Lord was. I have no hesitation in saying that Mary was one of the most wonderful of women ever to live, but she was not God. She was not perfect. If she had have been perfect, she never would have said in the words we find in verse 47, “My spirit hath rejoiced in God my Savior.” If she had been divine, she would not have needed a Savior, but by her own testimony, that is what God was to her, her “Saviour.”

— So if you are inclined to think of Mary as a Person equal to the Members of the Trinity, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, I hope that you will put that out of your mind forever! What God was preparing to do with her was done all in grace, unmerited favor, and Mary would have been the first to say so.

But we still haven’t gotten to the angel Gabriel’s message. What was it that he had come to tell Mary? Listen to his words again in verses 31, 32, and 33. (Read.)

Mary was going to have a baby. He would be “a son.” And the angel told Mary what His Name would be: “Jesus.” Next Sunday, the Lord willing, we will see that when the angel of the Lord spoke to Joseph about Mary, he gave Joseph this same Name, and explained its meaning: “For He shall save His people from their sins.”

— Vincent, in his *Word Studies of the New Testament* made this comment: Jesus. The Greek form of a Hebrew name, which had been borne by two illustrious individuals in former periods of the Jewish

history-- Joshua, the successor of Moses, and Jeshua, the high priest, who with Zerubbabel took so active a part in the re-establishment of the civil and religious polity of the Jews on their return from Babylon.

— And then he added:

The meaning of the name, therefore, finds expression in the title Saviour, applied to our Lord in Luke 1:47; 2:11; John 4:42.

And Gabriel continued: “He shall be great.” This adjective in a unique way belongs to the Lord Jesus Christ. None was ever as great as He, and none will ever surpass Him in His greatness. He is great as a Person. He combines perfect manhood and absolute Deity in Himself. He was great in His teaching. No one ever spoke as He did. He was great in His power. All authority in heaven and earth is His. He was great in His life. No one could convict Him of any sin. He was great in His compassion toward sinners. He was great in His death. He did not die because of any wrongdoing that He was guilty of, but by His death He forever guaranteed the salvation of all who will ever be saved—past, present, or future. And so He was great in putting away the sins of His people. He was great in His resurrection. He had conquered death and the grave, and has become the firstfruits of our resurrection and transformation into His very likeness.

— He is greater than all. As I said, that word “great” belongs to our Lord.

The angel Gabriel pointed out some of the greatness of our Lord. (Read verses 32 and 33.)

This meant that she was to become the mother of the Messiah according to the flesh. He was not only “the Son of the highest,” but he would be the Son of David, God and Man in one Person, “the highest” being a title of God, “the most high God,” a title depicting His absolute sovereignty not only upon the earth, but also in the heavens. He is the greatest of all. He will come the second time as Jacob’s king, and His kingdom will be forever. And it will encompass all of the nations of the earth. What folly and blasphemy for Cassius Clay, the boxer, to claim to be “the greatest.” That title belongs to the Lord Jesus Christ.

So we have our Lord’s first coming and His second coming referred to in the message of the angel Gabriel.

— But this leads to a very important question.

III. MARY’S QUESTION AND THE ANGEL’S ANSWER (Luke

1:34-37).

Mary's question means, "How can all of this be since I am not married?" And let me point this out: If Mary had been Deity, she would have known how such a thing could be. Besides, if she had a child like all other women do, then her child would have had a human father as well as a human mother, and so he could not have possibly been "the Son of the Highest," *the Son of God!*

The answer to Mary's question had been made before the foundation of the world. Do you want the truth about the conception of our Lord Jesus Christ as a Man? You have it in Luke 1:35. (Read.)

Here is the truth as to how a human mother could give birth to a divine Son. The angel Gabriel gave in these words the explanation of how one could be born Who was, and is, both God and Man. No explanation is necessary beyond this. The truth is all here. We could read the latter part of verse 35, "Therefore that which shall be born of thee shall be called holy, the Son of God."

Now is the time when Mary learned about Elisabeth. The birth of Mary's Son was certainly to be a miracle. Nothing like that had ever happened before, nor has it happened since. But the birth of John the Baptist was also a miracle. And Zacharias' response to the angel Gabriel was the reason he could not speak for nine months. What did he say to Gabriel? (Read Luke 1:7, and then verse 18.)

And this is what the angel Gabriel said to Mary about Elisabeth, doubtless for Mary's encouragement. And then Gabriel added what we have in verse 37: "For with God nothing shall be impossible." The old ASV gives this translation of Luke 1:37, "For no word from God shall be void of power." *This means that God never makes a promise but what He has the power to see that it comes to pass.*

This satisfied Mary, and so she responded as we see in verse 38. (Read.)

The angel was faithful in delivering God's message to the virgin Mary, and the Word from God produced faith in Mary's heart. Her attitude was one of total submission to the God and His purpose for her.

How did Mary present herself to the angel, and, consequently, to God? She said, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord." What is a handmaid? This

is the feminine form of what the Apostle Paul delighted to call himself, a δούλος of Jesus Christ. Mary said, δούλη. She was giving herself in complete submission to do the will of God. She was saying, “However, Lord, you want to use me, I am ready!” What delight Gabriel must have had when he returned to heaven to tell the Lord what Mary had said! *Mary wasn't God, but Mary was godly!* She is not just a good example for you ladies, but she is a good example for us men, and for you young people, and even for you dear children. How I wish and pray that I will always be able to say, “Behold, the bond-servant of the Lord; be it unto me according to Thy Word.” That is the ground on which we need to live.

Concl: I wonder if this is the way that Mary thought about how the Lord wanted to use her: “God has promised down through the years of time that He would provide a Savior for us from our sins. And I am just as much in need of that Savior as anyone else is. Therefore, if I am to be His servant to mother His Son, in what better way can I show my love for Him than in being willing to do His will for His glory.”

You know, as I have read my Bible this year I have been impressed at the many times the Bible likens great travail, great pain, to what a woman goes through in bringing a child into the world. That is really the supreme example of experiencing pain. Ladies, how would you like to give birth to a child in a barn with no one to help you but a husband who has had no classes on how to help, or what to do. Don't think that it was an easy thing for Mary to be the mother of our Lord in His humanity. You can be sure that the Devil opposed it in every way that He could. But, oh, what must have been her joy to hold that precious baby in her arms, a miracle of the grace of God, and to know that He was to be the Savior of the world. And yet she must have known, too, that it meant He would have to be a sacrifice for her sins, and for the sins of everyone whom the Father had given to Him. When you think of it, there is really no end to contemplating what it cost the virgin Mary to become the one through whom Jesus Christ would be born.

Every day should be for us a day when with all of our hearts we thank God for sending His Son to be our Savior, the only Savior, the One Who became a man that He might suffer and die to save us from our sins.

THE ANGEL OF THE LORD AND JOSEPH

Matthew 1:18-25

Intro: In Luke chapter 1 we learned how the virgin Mary was informed how the virgin Mary was informed that she was to become the mother of the promised Savior, the Messiah of Israel. The angel Gabriel was the one sent from God to give her this extremely important message just as he had appeared to the priest Zacharias to tell him that he would be the father of the Messiah's forerunner who was to have the name of John. But let us look at the way Gabriel described himself to Zacharias. The words are found in Luke 1:19:

And the angel answering said unto him, I am Gabriel, that stand in the presence of God; and am sent to speak unto thee, and to shew thee these glad tidings.

The only two times that Gabriel is mentioned in the NT are in Luke 1:19, and again in Luke 1:26. The only other references to Gabriel are in the book of Daniel (8:16; 9:21). Each time he came in the book of Daniel it was with a message from God. And that was true of his appearance to Zacharias as well as to the virgin Mary. Here in Matthew 1 when "the angel of the Lord" appeared to Joseph, it was for the same purpose. We can only assume that this also was Gabriel (even though his name is not given), and that he had come from the presence of God, this time, to speak to Joseph. He came when Joseph was facing the most difficult time in his life.

Let me call it:

I. JOSEPH'S PERPLEXITY (Matt. 1:18-19).

We are told in verse 19 that Joseph was "a just man." This not only means that he was just before God, a saved man, but he lived a life which proved that he was righteous before God. In other words, he was righteous before God, and he was righteous before men. And it is very much to be expected that he would have fallen in love with Mary who was a virtuous virgin. Mary was promised to Joseph. They were engaged to be married.

However, before they came together as husband and wife, Joseph discovered that Mary was pregnant; she was going to have a baby. And he knew that it was not his child. We can only guess that this must have been some time after Mary's visit with Elisabeth. She had been with Elisabeth for three months. We are told in verse 18 of our text that "she was found

with child of the Holy Spirit.” But all that Joseph knew was that “she was with child.” We do not know what conversations had gone on between them, if any, *but what we do know is that Joseph could only come to the conclusion that Mary was guilty of adultery.* This was incredible to him. He had fallen in love with Mary because of her godliness, and it was the worst moment in his life when he was confronted with the fact of her pregnancy.

This was a clear violation of the seventh commandment which said, “Thou shalt not commit adultery” (Ex. 20:14). The penalty for the violation of this commandment was death. And death was to be by stoning. Deut. 22:22-24 described the apparent situation that Mary had been involved in:

22 If a man be found lying with a woman married to an husband, then they shall both of them die, both the man that lay with the woman, and the woman: so shalt thou put away evil from Israel.

23 If a damsel that is a virgin be betrothed unto an husband, and a man find her in the city, and lie with her;

24 Then ye shall bring them both out unto the gate of that city, and ye shall stone them with stones that they die; the damsel, because she cried not, being in the city; and the man, because he hath humbled his neighbour's wife: so thou shalt put away evil from among you (Deut. 22:22-24).

Joseph, being “a just man,” would have known the Law, but obviously he did not want to kill Mary, nor have her killed. He was not setting aside the Law, but he was exercising mercy as God had shown mercy to David and to Bathsheba. Joseph did not even want to publicize the sin he thought that Mary had been involved in. So it was his plan to break their engagement as secretly as possible to spare her as much shame as he could.

We can't blame Joseph for thinking what he was thinking. He was not willing to do what the Law said he could do, but he knew that he could not go ahead with the wedding. You talk about a man who was crushed into the dust, so to speak; Joseph was that man. He was forced to believe the worst about the one whom he had considered to be the personification of virtue. And yet he knew that she was not divine. He knew that she was not perfect. And if a godly man like David could initiate such a sin, it was certainly within the realm of possibility that his beloved Mary could fall.

At this point Matthew tells us that Joseph experienced:

II. DIVINE INTERVENTION (Matt. 1:20-21).

The words, “while he thought on these things,” expresses the time of indescribable agony of heart and soul that Joseph was experiencing. His whole life seemed to crash down around him.

Then it was that a messenger was sent from the very presence of God. I don't know how fast angels can fly, but you can be sure that this one came from God to Joseph faster than the speed of light. And he appeared to Joseph in a dream. We can imagine that Joseph had trouble sleeping that night, and that finally, from sheer exhaustion, he fell asleep. It was not at all unusual for God to speak to people in dreams before the Scriptures were concluded.

He spoke to Joseph by name so there would be no question in Joseph's mind but that the angel of the Lord was speaking to him. And in view of the child that was at that moment in Mary's womb, it is significant also that the angel addressed Joseph as “thou son of David.” This would have Messianic significance to the godly Joseph.

And then he began his message with the same words that he had spoken to Mary, the words, “Fear not.” Joseph was probably struggling with fear at that moment as much or more than he had at any time in his life. But he was soon to learn that he had no reason to be afraid. His fear was soon to leave him to be replaced with the greatest sense of the peace of God that he had ever experienced. Look at the words which he heard in his dream as they are recorded in the latter part of verse 20 and all of verse 21.
(Read.)

Instead of breaking the engagement and putting Mary away silently, but in shame, he was told as a direct revelation from God to go right ahead with their wedding plans. She had not been unfaithful to him. She was just as pure from any such sin as she had always been. She was to have a child which was conceived in her by the Holy Spirit. And the angel told Joseph what he had told Mary. She was having a son. His Name had already been chosen by God. It was JESUS! And it had the full significance of its meaning: “For He shall save His people from their sins.” If you know the doctrines of grace, you can see here the great teaching of particular redemption! Our Lord could have saved everyone who ever lived by His death (and it would cost Him His death), but His death was particularly for those whom the Father had given to Him. These JESUS would not help people to save themselves, but He had come to Mary as the One Who

would do all that was necessary for the salvation of those whom He intended to save.

Now remember, it was not the privilege of angels to make up their own messages. They were messengers of the Word of God! And therefore this message would have come to Joseph with the same power, the same convincing power that Gabriel had given the Word of God to Mary!

But there was added proof which was also brought to Joseph's attention. I will call it,

III. THE ADDED PROOF OF SCRIPTURE (Matt. 1:22-23).

Recently in our Tuesday Class I took up the verse that Matthew quoted here in verse 23. You all know that it is found in Isa. 7:14. Those who like to deny the virgin birth of the Lord Jesus Christ have argued that Isa. 7:14 does not have anything to do with a Messiah; that it is merely a prediction that Isaiah's wife was going to have a son, and that son was to be a sign to King Ahaz that Judah would not be overrun by her enemies. It is true that Isaiah's wife did have a son, and that he was a sign to King Ahaz. But the word that the Holy Spirit, the Author of Scripture, used in that place was capable of meaning *a young married woman, or a virgin*. It was a prophecy of double reference. So that while it was a prophecy that had an immediate fulfillment in Isaiah's family, it also was to have a future fulfillment in a Child Who was to be virgin-born, that is, with no human father, and so the word that Matthew used means what it meant in the case of the birth of our Lord. "Behold, a virgin shall conceive..." It was not until just before that prophecy was to have its fulfillment in the birth of the Lord Jesus that it was revealed that He was conceived by the Holy Spirit.

And so Isaiah 7:14 included words which could not have been completely fulfilled in any other way except through the birth of Mary's Son. Our Lord was a real, perfect human being. But He was also "Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us." So, as we learned from Luke 1, Mary's Son was God manifest in human flesh. If Jesus had had a human father, he would have been a sinner like we are, and so instead of being a Savior, he would have needed a Savior just like we do.

But what is important for us to realize about this passage so far, is that the message of the angel of the Lord was confirmed by the prophecy of Isaiah. Both the angel and Isaiah spoke as messengers of the revealed Word and

will of God.

The passage concludes as our text in Luke 1 concluded in telling us about Mary's response to the message of Gabriel. Here in verses 24 and 25 we have:

IV. THE OBEDIENCE OF JOSEPH (Matt. 1:24-25).

If Joseph needed confirmation that his marriage to Mary was the will of God, he certainly had it! The angel of the Lord had said to him, "Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife." And so by the gracious intervention of God through the angel of the Lord, he was no longer afraid to take Mary as his wife, and what had been the most unhappy days of his life, turned out to be a time of unsurpassed joy.

But the Holy Spirit also tells us in the last verse of the chapter that Joseph and Mary did not actually live together as husband and wife until after "her firstborn son" was born, thus preserving the truth that JESUS was not Joseph's son, but the Son of Mary, conceived by the Holy Spirit.

And although we are not told so, it is reasonable to expect that as Joseph and Mary talked about their experiences with the angel of the Lord, their faith was confirmed and strengthened when they realized that they both were told the same thing on separate occasions when it would have been natural for them to have never considered such a possibility. And what they were told was also confirmed by the prophet Isaiah in words written some 700 years before the birth of JESUS, their Messiah, and their Lord.

Concl: While we have never seen the Lord as Peter did, yet we can say with him that "we have not followed cunningly devised fables." What we believe about the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ was predicted by Isaiah years before it took place when such a birth had never been known to the prophet. Then the angel of the Lord told Mary what was going to happen to her, and separately revealed to Joseph in a dream that what he feared was not the case at all. Instead, God was fulfilling in Mary that prediction Isaiah had uttered so long ago. So we have three messages from heaven confirming that the Messiah would be born of a woman, the seed of the woman, and yet without a human father because He would be conceived in Mary by the Holy Spirit.

But we have the added encouragement to our faith because we have four records of the life and ministry of JESUS – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and

John – which fully confirm what Isaiah led us to believe, and what the angel of the Lord told Mary and Joseph, that Mary’s Son was also the Son of God, Who came to earth to die for sinners. No other sacrifice would be acceptable to God. The OT sacrifices which typified Christ were to be “without blemish,” typifying His sinless perfection. There is no other way we could have such a sacrifice except through One Who was born without sin. Christ died as a perfect Sacrifice. And this is why Peter uttered those wonderful words which we find in Acts 4:12,

Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.

Calvin said about this passage:

Certainly, no man will ever raise a question on this subject, except from curiosity; and no man will obstinately keep up the argument, except from an extreme fondness for disputation (XVI, 107).

The case in favor of the virgin birth of our Lord Jesus Christ is fully confirmed. The evidence is indisputable. The persons who close their hearts and minds to this great truth, do so to the eternal condemnation of their own souls. Let us not be ashamed to declare that Jesus Christ, the Savior, has come, and shed His blood on Calvary’s cross for the salvation of sinners, and that whosoever believeth in Him shall not be ashamed.

Notice in the last verse of our chapter that Mary’s part and Joseph’s part are, as Alexander Maclaren so clearly pointed out: “**She**...brought forth her firstborn son: and **he** called his name JESUS.” Thus, their obedience was complete. And the One Whom Joseph thought would be the offspring of shame, was the greatest One ever to be born, the holy Son of God, JESUS, our Lord, and our Savior.

THE ANGEL OF THE LORD AND THE SHEPHERDS

Luke 2:8-20

Intro: Of all of the passages of Scripture that have to do with the birth of our Lord, this is probably the best known. This is a passage which children have memorized, probably since it was first written, especially down through verse 14, and parents and teachers in teaching it to children, have learned it for themselves. The incident which took place on that night stirs our imaginations as we try to visualize the scene—shepherds taking care of their flock when all of a sudden “the angel of the Lord” appears to them with a message from God. And you can see that the shepherds took it as a message from God because of what they said according to verse 15, “Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this things which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us.” And verse 20 gives us further evidence that the shepherds believed that the message had come from God:

And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them (Luke 2:20).

In our text for today we have two divisions to these thirteen verses:

- 1) The appearance of the angels to the shepherds (vv.8-14).
- 2) The response of the shepherds to what the angels told them (vv. 15-20).

I. THE APPEARANCE OF THE ANGELS TO THE SHEPHERDS (Luke 2:8-14).

One truth that all of us need to learn in our lives as Christians, was stated by the prophet Isaiah many years before Christ was born. Most of you have heard these verses many times, and you will hear them many times in the future if our Lord tarries. I am thinking of Isa. 55:8-9:

8 For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the LORD.

9 For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.

The fact that God’s ways and our ways, or man’s ways, are not the same, is very apparent from the passages we have considered last Sunday, and then this passage which we are considering today. God just does things in a manner that is totally different from the way we would do them, and, at the same time, we have to say that His ways are higher and better, infinitely so, than our ways. But, you might ask, “*What is it that you have in mind?*” Let me explain myself.

I can imagine what some modern day publicity agents would do concerning the birth of Christ if they were given the task of making the birth of Jesus Christ known. They probably would have taken the largest feast day of the year, when Jews would have been present from all over the Roman Empire, and would have had the angel of the Lord appear to thousands of people at one time. They would have wanted to make it as spectacular as possible.

Or they might have wanted the angel of the Lord to appear at a meeting of the Sanhedrin when that group of men would have been together and could have seen and heard the angel of the Lord for themselves.

Or think how someone might have suggested that the angel of the Lord would come to Herod, or Pilate, in some of their great courts. Any of these choices would have been very impressive, and the news would certainly have been out!

But God didn't do that! Instead, He sent His angel to an insignificant and unknown group of shepherds. We don't know their names. We don't know how many of them there were. There are a lot of things that we don't know about what happened. The Scriptures tell us that "the angel of the Lord came upon them" (v. 9), and so it may be that first the angel of the Lord appeared in the sky, to be followed later by "a multitude of the heavenly host, but we can't say for sure. *But can you imagine such a great event, the most important birth in all of human history, and the announcement was made to some lowly shepherds about whom we hear nothing more than what is right here in these verses?*

Even think about Joseph and Mary. We know that they had royal blood running in their veins, but that was not important in Israel, nor in the Roman Empire of that day. Joseph and Mary were very common people from man's perspective. The Lord was not born in the best inn that there was in Jerusalem. The inns were full. Jesus Christ, the Son of God Who became a Man, was born in place where animals were kept. (Read verses 6 and 7.) What is a manger? It is a crib out of which cattle and horses and pigs ate their food. I am sure that everyone here today had a much better birthplace than that, a place that was warm and clean and comfortable!

Now we know that God is a sovereign God. It was not at accident that Joseph and Mary were in Bethlehem at the time Jesus was born. That in itself was a fulfillment of an OT prophecy which you will find in Micah 5:2, which says:

But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting.

Likewise we know that what the Holy Spirit led Solomon to write in Prov. 21:1 is also true. Listen to what Solomon wrote:

The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD, as the rivers of water: he turneth it whithersoever he will.

So, when we read in verses 1 and 3 of our chapter that “there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed,” and that “all went to be taxed, every one to his own city,” you and I must believe that it was God Who moved upon the heart of Caesar to issue that decree at that particular time. That mighty Emperor was nothing more than a tool in the hand of God to do the will of God.

So the fact that Joseph and Mary were not at home when our Lord was born, and that they were in Bethlehem at a time when the inn was full, was not a mistake. It was all according to the will of God! This was the divine plan. Was God just trying to make it as miserable for Joseph and Mary as He could? Certainly not! And, by the way, if you read your Bible carefully, you will not find a single word of complaint coming from either Joseph or Mary! They were godly people who were acquainted with the ways of the Lord.

No, a passage of Scripture which helps us answer our questions about the strange ways of God, is found in the last few verses of 1 Corinthians, chapter 1. Let me read them to you:

26 For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called:

27 But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty;

28 And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are:

29 That no flesh should glory in his presence.

30 But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption:

31 That, according as it is written, He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord (1 Cor. 1:26-31).

God has, for the most part, chosen people who are nothing in themselves

so that when people would glory in what was done, they would glory in the Lord, not in themselves, nor in anyone else—just in the Lord! That’s how I got in.

So that which happened in Bethlehem on that night, although it was totally unnoticed by the world, was the most important, most influential birth ever to take place in the history of the world. And we gather today to glorify God that He sent His Son to save us from our sins.

Hasn’t God always worked this way? Think of Abraham, or Moses, of David, of Amos, of our Lord’s disciples, and even of the Apostle Paul, who could have become very famous as a Jewish rabbi, but what did he call himself? *The chief of sinners.*

So this was all according to the way God works.

But let us get to our text.

Verse 8 tells us that it was night when the angel of the Lord came to the shepherds. They were standing guard over their sheep, to keep them from being stolen or killed by some animal. They would sleep in shifts to make it through the night. Suddenly the angel of the Lord “came upon them.” And there was a bright light like the light which guided the children of Israel from Egypt to the promised land. It was a manifestation of the very presence of the Lord, brighter than a thousand halogen lights. And it all terrified them. There they were in the darkness of the night, suddenly it was brighter than daylight all around them. And they were terrified!

And then the angel spoke, and his first words were, “Fear not.” How becoming this was to herald the coming of the Savior through Whom it was going to be possible for sinful men to enjoy peace with God, as well as the peace of God in their hearts.

What the angel was doing was declaring the Gospel to these shepherds. This is the meaning of the words, “I bring you good tidings of great joy.” But the message was not just for them, but for all, lit., the people.

We have here a statement of the great doctrine of election. These were *lowly* shepherds, but they were chosen of God, and the Son of God was born in a special way for them, for their salvation. And *the people* were those given to the Lord by the Father, and for whom in particular the Lord had come to suffer and to die.

Verse 11 gives us both the humanity and the Deity of the Lord. His becoming a Man in no way lessened His Deity. He is the Savior, and the only Savior. He is Christ, the Messiah, Who is the Lord. And “the Lord” is very likely meant to be the equivalent of Jehovah in the OT.

The contrast between verse 11 and verse 12 should constantly amaze us. This glorious Savior, who is Christ the Lord, is the babe (the Greek is better translated, *a babe*), not lying in a crib of immense value, but a manger, where animals usually feed. Whenever you see cattle feeding in a barn, with all of the offensive odor that goes with it, remember that that is the kind of a place where our Lord has His crib.

So in verse 11 we have the glory of our Lord; in verse 12, His humiliation. And His lowly place was the “sign.”

That was the end of the message given from God by the angel of the Lord. But what more needed to be said about the Person of our Lord and the Mission upon which our Lord had entered by His birth. And that which started in a stable never did rise much above that throughout His life, and certainly dipped even lower in His death.

But after the angel of the Lord had finished his message then just as suddenly as the light had shown at first, “a multitude of the heavenly host” appeared. And they did not sing in the city square of Bethlehem, nor to thousands packed into a great stadium somewhere, but to a few shepherds with their sheep out in the country. How unusual are the ways of the Lord, and how different from our ways.

The gist of their song was this:

Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men (Luke 2:14).

Please notice that the glory of God comes first, and then peace on earth. As long as we are mainly concerned about peace, but leave God out of our lives, we will be talking peace, but never experiencing it. And let it be said that our Lord’s primary purpose in coming to the earth in such humiliation, was not for the salvation of sinners, but for the glory of God. And, oh, how God was glorified in the life of His Son, and in His death.

The old ASV of which the NASB is a revision, renders this verse

Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace among men in whom he is well pleased (Luke 2:14).

Peace is a personal matter, not national. If men do not experience peace in

their hearts, there cannot be national peace. There is no true peace where God is not pleased. That is why we as a nation are in such a hopeless situation. We are not concerned about being pleasing to God, and we can never please God except through the transformation of our lives by the Gospel of the grace of God.

“Glory to God in the highest” means in the highest heavens, glory from the angels, and glory from the redeemed people of God who are already there. On earth there needs to be “peace,” not peace by man’s definition, but *peace with God*. That is what Paul was talking about when he wrote Rom. 5:1,

Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

What an experience those shepherds had! “Unto you” the angel of the Lord had said, not “unto us,” for there is no salvation for angels who sin. Nor did they say, “all people without exception,” but “unto the people, those chosen in Christ from before the foundation of the world. If you want to know that you are elect, come to Christ today, seeking His mercy in salvation. He promised that “all that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out” (John 6:37).

But now let us look at the last part of our text, verses 15-20.

II. THE RESPONSE OF THE SHEPHERDS TO WHAT THE ANGELS TOLD THEM (Luke 2:15-20).

To those lowly shepherds were given three great honors:

- 1) The first to see the Lord in human flesh.
- 2) The first to spread that message that the Christ had come.
- 3) The first among men to praise God for the coming of His Son.

Verses 15 and 16 tell us about the first; verses 17 through 19 tells us about the second, and verse 20 tells us about the third.

A. The first to see the Lord in His flesh (vv. 15-16).

We can be sure that they made some provision for their sheep. It is useless for us to speculate on what they did. But they lost no time in going to Bethlehem. How far it was, or how long it took, we don’t know. But they found Mary, and Joseph, and the baby Jesus in the manger.

I would remind you of another verse in the Gospel of John which teaches

us, in the words of the Lord Jesus Himself that

No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day (John 6:44).

So for the shepherds to go seeking the Lord even when He was a baby, means that the Father was drawing them. And when people are drawn by God, they come to Christ. God is sovereign not only over kings, but over all of us. We would never have come to Christ on our own, but we came and found Him because He found us first and drew us to His Son.

But let me say a word about the shepherds second response.

B. The first to spread the message that Christ had come (vv. 17-19).

One evidence that a person, or persons, have been saved, is that they want to tell others about the Lord. And just as the shepherds wasted no time in coming to see the Lord, neither did they waste any time in telling others about the Lord. Notice in particular the words, “the saying which was told them concerning this child.” Now “the saying” had come to them through the angel of the Lord and the heavenly host of angels, but remember that it was *the word of the Lord* that had come to them. And that is what we need to spread, the actual words of God which we have in the Bible. It is the Word which is living and powerful... It is the Word which brings people to Christ.

But notice another very precious result. *The shepherds ministered to the mother of our Lord.* Luke said in verse 19 that “Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart.” She was learning, too. And the shepherds had a part in what God was doing even in Mary’s heart. The people to whom the shepherds spoke “wondered,” *i.e., marveled.* Mary “pondered.” This means that things were *coming together* in her mind and in her heart.

And now for the last verse. As far as the Scriptures were concerned, the shepherds were

C. The first among men to praise God for the coming of His Son (v. 20).

The shepherds went back to their sheep praise God for the message of God which had been given to them by the angels. “To God be the glory; great things He hath done.” And all of the glory for salvation belongs to God.

The shepherds did not deserve to hear. It was the grace of God that they did, and they knew it. And so they gave their praise to Him.

Concl: I don't know if this was the time when these shepherds were saved, but I am inclined to think that it was. We have in all of this a perfect picture of the way people are brought to Christ. They Word is given to them. The Father draws them, and gives them the faith to believe. They come to the Lord and by faith see Him as the Savior Who is Christ the Lord. They believe, and then go to tell others. And then they spend the rest of their lives praising God for His Word which was used to bring them to Christ.

People do not always respond as the shepherds did. Some marvel at the message, but never come. Others marvel, and come right away. Others marvel, and come later. But the important thing for us is to get the message to them. God is the One Who determines how the message will be used. So let us at this Christmas time and throughout the rest of our lives be telling people about our Savior, trusting the Lord to use His Word according to His will. Let me close with two other verses from Isaiah in support of what I have just said:

10 For as the rain cometh down, and the snow from heaven, and returneth not thither, but watereth the earth, and maketh it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower, and bread to the eater:

11 So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it (Isa. 55:10-11).