

International Sunday School Lesson Study Notes

Lesson Text: Luke 2:1-17

Lesson Title: Jesus' Birth (Christmas)

Introduction

Luke's Gospel is a Gospel of good news. The story of the birth of Jesus Christ is by far the best news man has ever been given. The birth of Jesus Christ is important because it became the high point in history. All history before Christ's birth is dated B.C., before Christ. All history since is A.D., *Anno Domini*, Latin for "the year of our Lord." The birth of Jesus Christ is the most important moment in all of history.

Jesus' birth is also important because it is the fulfilment of God's promise to send a Redeemer (Genesis 3:15-16). The long awaited promise of God sending His only begotten Son is now come to pass. Everybody in Israel knew some things about the promise of a coming Messiah but only God knew how many things had to come together for this miraculous birth to take place. Luke tells us how it happened.

When you think about all the stories, books and documentaries that have been written about famous births, you are somewhat taken back by the simple and straightforward words the Holy Spirit inspired Luke to write about Jesus' birth. While Luke establishes a time frame for historical purposes, he still tells the basic story of Jesus' birth in less than 150 words in the first seven verses of Luke 2. Luke kept the message of Jesus' birth simple so sinners like you and me could understand what was happening. That is simply amazing and amazingly simple!

Jesus' Birth and the World (Luke 2:1-5)

Verse 1-5

"And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. (And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.) And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:) To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child."

The *world setting* is recorded by Luke with the words, "in those days." It has reference to what was taking place at the time of Christ's birth. Throughout his gospel, Luke connects the events of Jesus' life to the world as a whole. "Caesar Augustus" is actually Gaius Octavius. He ruled the Roman Empire for 45 years, from 30 B.C. to 14 A.D. "Caesar" is a term like king or emperor. It is a title. "Augustus" means "revered one, or honored one."

The "decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed" was more providence than politics. "Caesar" issued the decree for this tax because God ordered it to move Joseph and

Mary out of "the city of Nazareth" to "Bethlehem" in order to fulfill Micah's prophecy that Messiah would be born in "Bethlehem" (Micah 5:2). "Caesar," like most politicians today didn't have a clue what God was doing. Don't let the world frighten you. God is always in control!

Luke now focuses in a little closer home and tells us about the *national setting* in regard to Jesus' birth. He tells us about "Galilee, Nazareth, the city of David, and "Bethlehem." ("And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria) has raised some questions among Bible scholars regarding the date of Jesus' birth. "Syria" was the most important of all the Roman provinces, and "Cyrenius" served as "governor" or "commander" and in several other capacities. Normally, Roman "taxing" (censuses) came every fourteen years. The first historical record available of a Roman "taxing" came in A.D. 6. The "taxing" mentioned by Luke here may have been around 6 or 8 B.C., while "Cyrenius" was the military governor of Syria. Luke's use of the word "first" or "prior" most likely refers to a "taxing" before or prior to the more well-known census of A.D. 6.

The "taxing," while Roman in origin, was most likely carried out by Jews and undoubtedly followed Jewish customs (Numbers 1:2-3). This required "all to be taxed" including "Joseph." Their journey "from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem" was some ninety miles south. "Bethlehem," which means "house of bread," sat 2,350 feet above sea level. They "went up from Galilee" refers to their literally going "up" in elevation. It was no easy journey for an expectant mother.

Jesus' Birth and the Parents (Luke 2:6-7)

Joseph was required to make this journey to "Bethlehem" for the census, because he was a descendant of King David of Bethlehem. Luke doesn't give us much detail as to why "Mary" would make this difficult and dangerous trip. It is possible that the couple may have intended to stop along the way and rest but because of the crowd and all the taxing process things took longer than expected. We really need not speculate because we know it was God's plan for Jesus to be born at "Bethlehem" and every move the couple is making is guided by the unseen hand of God.

Verse 6-7

"And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn."

Luke now changes focus again from the world setting and the *national setting* to the *personal setting* and tells us about Mary, Joseph and the birth of Jesus. "And so it was, that, while they were there..." seem so insignificant and yet all history and eternity rests upon them. "They were there." They were exactly where the prophet Micah said they would be when the Messiah would be born. No family or friends to help Mary in her delivery and birth, and yet, she "was there." No sterile environment, no mid-wives, no neo-natal unit nearby if needed, and yet, she "was there."

Luke tells us Mary gave birth to her "firstborn son." The word "firstborn" is *prototokon* in the Greek. Mary would have other sons and children but Jesus was the "firstborn." She "wrapped him in swaddling clothes" which was the process of taking long strips of cloth and wrapping the arms and legs of the baby tight for warmth and protection. She then "laid him in a manger" which refers to a "animal feeding trough."

The "inn" referred to by Luke was a primitive kind of place where people who traveled could stay in out of the cold and rain. If you're thinking about a nice hotel or motel as we have available today, that wasn't the case. It suggests poverty, loneliness, and rejection. It could have even been large tent like structures where groups of people just found a place and laid down. That being the case, the fact that "there was no room for them in the inn" was most likely divine providence. The heavenly Father prevented His only begotten Son from being born in an open air yard filled with shady characters. Jesus is entering the world and this is a sacred scene reserved for Mary and Joseph alone. God will see to it that the ones who appreciate it will be notified first.

Jesus' Birth and the Angels and Shepherds (Luke 2:8-17)

Verse 8

"And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night."

While there were Old Testament prophecies and promises that specifically detailed how Jesus would be conceived and where he would be born, nothing is specifically written that would have caused "shepherds" to have been listening or looking for the angels or Jesus. It was just business as usual for them as they were "abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night."

The "shepherds" were "in the same country" or nearby at the time of Jesus' birth. The word "manger" in verse 7 is *phatne* (fat-nay) which suggests the "manager" could have been a feeding trough carved out of a stone in a cave. It so, it is possible that the place of Jesus' birth may have been a cave familiar to these very "shepherds."

"Shepherds" were commonly viewed as the lowest people socially of that day. Shepherding was a needed profession but they were not the movers and the shakers of their day. They were basically uneducated and unskilled in anything but shepherding. Since they had to watch their sheep on the Sabbath, they violated the Mosaic Law which caused them to be looked upon by the Pharisees as outcasts and spiritually inferior. In spite of all of that, God sent His angel to make the greatest announcement in the world to the lowest of the low, the humblest of the humble, shepherds.

Verse 9

"And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid."

An "angel of the Lord," possibly the angel Gabriel (Luke 1:19, 26), "came upon them" or "stood among them" with the blazing "glory of the Lord." God's "glory" simply defined is His "manifest presence." God doesn't have a body, a form, He's invisible. But when He reveals Himself, He does so with a type of brilliant, shining manifestation of light. When "the glory of the Lord shone round about" the shepherds, God was saying, "My presence is back." His "glory" that had appeared in the tabernacle in Exodus 40, in the temple in Solomon's day, and was seen departing from God's house in Ezekiel's day (Ezekiel 8-10), is back! And it is back not in a place or a building, but in the person of Jesus Christ (John 1:1-14).

We often talk about the manifest presence of God in our church services but most of us have never experienced anything even remotely similar to what the shepherds did on the night of Jesus' birth. What is happening here is a monumental moment in redemptive history. The shepherds are not having a good service. They are experiencing God in their midst out in a "field" during the normal activities of life.

The presence of "angels" and "glory of the Lord" resulted in the shepherds being "sore afraid" or, terrified. Being in the presence of God's messengers and God's glory always results in fear. There is nothing trivial or comical about being in God's presence.

Verse 10

"And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people."

The "angels" words "Fear not," simply means these shepherds do not have to worry about dying in the presence of God. This is going to be a great occasion for them because the angel is bringing a message of "good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people." "Good tidings" means "good news." The "good news" the angel is speaking about to the shepherds is that salvation "shall be to all people" (Isaiah 45:22). Salvation is not for a select group of people you and I might pick out, but according to God's Word salvation is for "*whosoever will*" (Revelation 22:17). Salvation is for both Jew and Gentile, male or female, slave or free. Salvation is for those born in town, up town, down town or for those who have never been to town! The "good news" of Christmas is that salvation is for "all people." If the "good news" is "for all people," then "all people" are responsible to do something with that "good news." If you are lost you are responsible to repent of unbelief and believe. If you are saved you are responsible to share the good news with everyone you meet.

The "tidings" or "good news" carries with it "great joy." "Great" is the Greek word *mega* and "joy" is the Greek word *chara*. The angel is saying, "I bring you great, large, spacious news of gladness!" The word "bring" describes the actions of a messenger bearing official proclamation of the king, or announcing news of a military victory.

Verse 11-12

"For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger."

The message of the angel to the shepherds is so precise and each word carries both temporal and eternal implications. "For unto you" is plural and means not only for those shepherds that first Christmas night, but for all of humanity a Savior is "born this day." "Born this day" means "the waiting is over." The long expected Messiah has arrived. "In the city of David" is a reference to Bethlehem. Bethlehem was not formally called "the city of David." Most Jewish people identified Jerusalem as the city of David. But the shepherds would have identified the angel's reference.

"A Saviour" is the heart of the angels announcement to the shepherds. Only a few people in the world at this moment knew a "Saviour" had arrived. Caesar Augustus didn't have a clue. Cyrenius wasn't aware of what was happening. Herod would only find out when the wise men would come seeking Jesus. The only people who knew were Joseph, Mary, the angels from heaven, and now a bunch of lowly shepherds. But soon the world would know!

"A Saviour." Christmas can be summed up in those two words, "A Saviour." That's what we're still telling people. These shepherds would recognize the word "Saviour." It was an Old Testament word because Israel knew God as Savior. Jews would know what the word meant because Savior was a Jewish concept as well. When the word "Saviour" was mentioned the people thought of a Rescuer, a Deliverer (Deuteronomy 20:4; Psalm 24:5; 25:5; Isaiah 63:8-9; Micah 7:18; Luke 1:47, 69; 2:25-30; 1 Timothy 4:10).

The "Saviour" born on this day "is Christ the Lord." Luke placed the title "Christ" between that of "Saviour" and "the Lord." The Greek term for "Saviour" is closely associated with God, who is called both *theos* (God) and *kyrios* (Lord). "Christ the Lord" essentially means the same as "Messiah God." Hallelujah!

The "sign" given to the shepherds by the angel was that they "would find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger." There were no doubt other babies born in Bethlehem that night but it is doubtful if many or any were "born in a manger." Where the Christ child was laid would distinguish him from all other babies. Laid in a feeding trough was certainly unique and different. The shepherds would have no problem identifying the Christ child.

Verse 13-14

"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, good will toward men."

As soon as the announcements was complete to the shepherds "a multitude of the heavenly host" of angels appeared "praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men." God's army of angels gathers over and around this heavenly announcement in a field to shepherds. Collectively, spontaneously, and unexpectedly this army in review celebrates Christ's birth. They represent the awesome power of heaven gathered for

peaceful purposes. Their message on this night is about "peace" and "good will," not war. "Peace" reflects the calm that man gave have in knowing Christ and accepting His great salvation. "Good will" refers to loving and lasting relationships on earth that can now exist because Jesus' has come to save.

Verse 15

"And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us."

Luke details for us the response of the shepherds to Jesus' birth. This sudden invasion of angels upon these lowly shepherds and the information they had been given might seem more than the average shepherd could handle. But it seems all be coming together for them and the question now is how they will respond.

We don't know how long the "heavenly host" stayed and praised God but when they departed "the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us." The shepherds left their flocks in the care of God and began their journey to Bethlehem. These shepherds received a message from God and believed it. Have you?

Verse 16

"And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger."

"They came in haste" indicates the shepherds wasted no time responding to the good news. They were enthusiastic and eager to find their way to the Christ child. This truth serves as a reminder to us that we should still be eager and thrilled to be in the presence of Christ and the work of God. This was the first legitimate Christmas rush!

What the shepherds "found" at Bethlehem were exactly what the angels had said they would find. And what the Bible says about Jesus Christ the Savior of the world is exactly what sinners will find when they come to Him for salvation. Just as Mary and Joseph were correctly informed and clearly directed to the Christ child, so sinners are clearly and correctly called upon to come to Jesus Christ alone for salvation (Acts 4:12).

Verse 17

"And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child."

The shepherds not only responded by coming, they also responded by witnessing. "When they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child." Luke doesn't tell us the conversation between Joseph and Mary and the shepherds but that must have been an amazing conversation. Remember, these are the only people in the world at that

time who knew about Jesus' birth. Joseph, Mary, the shepherds, and the angels of heaven. But that is all about to change. "They made known the saying" simply means "what they knew they were ready to share."

What do you know about the birth of Jesus? It's a shame when you think about the fact that the longer people are saved the less they seem to be excited about it or willing to share what they know about Christ. These shepherds were so joyful and so excited about Jesus' birth. It was all so fresh and so real. Where they went and all they said is not recorded. But the fact that they went and published what they knew is.

Question: Do you know enough to tell someone about Jesus? If you know Jesus you do! Go tell what you know about Jesus.

Conclusion

The fulfillment of Jesus' birth is without question the greatest single event in human history. It would have never occurred had not God intervened in the political, religious, social, and personal lives of people, rulers, and common ordinary men and women. The taxation, the trip, the timing and every other aspect of our Lord's birth as recorded by Luke, indicates the sovereign and providential hand of God. His hand still works in our world and our lives today.

If you want something to rejoice about this Christmas, rejoice that Luke kept the greatest story in history simple. You may also rejoice that Luke tells us that simple story must be shared. May the Lord help us to keep Christmas simple and share the good news.

Merry Christmas!

Amen.