

Why the Bethlehem Shepherds, Part 1

Luke 2:1-20

November 29, 2015

Open your Bibles to Luke's Gospel, we are going to continue the narrative that we started at verse 1 in Luke, Chapter 2. There is so much to see in this passage of Scripture. I am always amazed as I study God's word to see the incredible depth and intricacies of detail in Scripture. On the surface as you read it, it just seems like such a simple story. But just a little investigation, as you start to pick it apart and ask questions, just reveals there is so much more going on than you get at first glance. It's absolutely staggering. Today, we're going to go a couple layers deeper beneath the surface of this passage. It's a little bit different sermon. We're going to get a brief exposure to a discipline that's called Biblical Theology. Biblical Theology, it's really tracing some of the doctrines and themes of Scripture through the Bible over time. I'm not going to go into great lengths in that direction, in Biblical Theology, but just enough for you to get a taste of it. I want you to, to

have enough to appreciate the intricacies that exist in every passage of the Bible, illustrating it right here in this passage. What what's on the surface, it just seems so deceptively simple, but it's not simple.

There's a lot of depth here. Let me start by reading the text for you beginning in Luke 2:1. And then after that, I'm going to pose a couple of questions to you that demand further attention and observation. And it's as we go through and investigate, find the answers to those questions, we're going to discover such an amazing wealth of understanding in this text. And also gain a greater insight into the character of our God. Okay. So, Luke Chapter 2, 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

cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

“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 cloths and lying in a manger.’ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly hosts praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!’ When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.’ And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. When they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told the concerning the child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up all these things,

pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.”

Now, that text, as I’ve read it, from verse 1 to verse 20, it all goes together. It’s all one single narrative. And I realize it’s broken up in our translations by, by headings and paragraph breaks and such, but it’s actually one continuous narrative. It may not have been apparent to you as we read the text, but that first section there, verses 1 to 7, that is not the climax of the story. It does not climax with the birth of Jesus Christ. Those verses, as significant as they are they merely introduce the main focus of the text.

The main focus of the text is what the Angel of the Lord reveals to the shepherds when he appears in verse 10 to 14. It’s that proclamation of “good news of great joy for all the people.” The verb there is interesting when the angel says, “I’ve come to you to proclaim good news of great joy.” The verb there is *euangelizo*. *Euangelizo*, which is the Greek word that gives us the English transliterated word to evangelize. God’s sovereign

direction over all these details at the global level, at the regional level, at the personal intimate levels of husband and wife and their daily life and intimacy of childbirth, and all the rest, God was working providentially, sovereignly to push these main characters in the story to Bethlehem, to the same region as these local shepherds. Why? So, he could preach to them. So he could preach the Gospel.

It's interesting to see that. Caesar Augustus, this Publius Sulpicius Quirinius, these guys all exist for God's greater purpose. I mean they're big figures on the world's stage, but God's greater purpose is not what's happening there. It's what's happening here. It's what is happening in Bethlehem. His greater purpose to bring his Son into the world at exactly the right time, in exactly the right location, and in exactly the right circumstances. God wanted Joseph and Mary to get down to Bethlehem at this particular time of the year in close proximity to these particular shepherds, and in the kind of accommodations that would be abnormal and unusual for a couple having a baby, by any measure. He wanted it to happen exactly as it's laid out. And here's where we need to stop.

Having read the entire narrative, having noted these marks of sovereign providence of God directing circumstances in exactly, precisely this way; we need to stop and ask a couple of questions. A number of questions actually arise throughout this narrative. First of all, why Bethlehem? Why Bethlehem? What is so significant about this insignificant little town? You say, Well that's easy. It's because God promised the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. That's true, but it's not the end of the sermon, okay? God intended to fulfill ancient prophecy according to Micah 5:2, just as you've said. "But you, O Bethlehem, Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days."

God had bound himself to his word and he needed to fulfill a promise that he had made through the prophet Micah more than 700 years before the birth of Christ. God will do whatever it takes directing world affairs, regional affairs, even intimate, personal, individual affairs. He'll do whatever it takes to fulfill his word. He is going to keep his word. God is absolutely trustworthy. His character is unquestionably faithful. But we're not content to leave it there because we're

curious. We want to ask the follow-up question, the deeper question here. Why Bethlehem? I mean God could have directed Micah to prophecy any other location really on the planet, right? Nazareth would have been convenient for this couple. I mean, could have been Capernaum of Galilee, but God chose Bethlehem. He put that town in the mouth of Micah. What is so special about Bethlehem?

Here's a second question: Once the baby is born, there's a pretty elaborate display in announcing his birth. Okay, we understand that, we've seen angels show up twice before, but why the shepherds? Why the shepherds? What's so significant about them? You say, Well that's because they're lowly and humble and the Gospel is for the humble. And you'd be right to say that. That's true as well. Mary said as much in her song, Luke 1:52, "God has exalted those of humble estate." But why the shepherds? The Angel of the Lord could have visited the humble, working class members of almost any other profession, the blacksmiths, the tinkerers, the shoemakers, the carpenters, whatever. Why these guys? Why shepherds? In fact, if he wanted to appear to the humble, why couldn't he have appeared to widows and orphans, the poverty-stricken of society? That would have made this

Gospel for the humble point as well, right? It would have made it emphatically.

So why did these shepherds get the special privilege of a heavenly birth? Get your Bibles ready. Get your hands warmed up because we're going to turn some pages and do a little Bible study and look at a few other Scriptures to answer the questions. As we find the answers to these two questions, we are really going to gain a, a much deeper understanding and appreciation of the angel's announcement in verses 10 to 20, okay. We're setting things up for that purpose because after all, that is the climax of the story. And at its heart is verse 11, where it says, "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord."

I'm going to give you my thesis right up front just so you'll spot it as we go along. Here's the thesis: God chose for Jesus to be born in Bethlehem, the birthplace of his father David, to break continuity with Israel's unfaithful leadership, number one; number two, to establish direct continuity with David's faithful leadership. We're going to move through a number



of Scriptures let me give you a main passage that kind of sets our focus correctly, all right? Right off the bat, write this one down. You don't need to turn there, but write it down, Psalm 78, verses 70 to 72. That's the last three verses in Psalm 78. Psalm 78:70 to 72 say this, "God chose David his servant and took him from the sheepfolds; from following the nursing ewes he brought him to shepherd Jacob his people, Israel his inheritance. With upright heart he shepherded them and guided them with his skillful hand."

"God chose David his servant and took him from the sheepfolds; from following the nursing ewes he brought him to shepherd Jacob his people, Israel his inheritance. With upright heart he shepherded them and guided them with his skillful hand." With very few exceptions, the kings of Israel and Judah, the entire Jewish priesthood, most of the prophets in Israel, not the ones named and recorded for us in Scripture, but most of the prophets, there were a lot of prophets in Israel that aren't named, they were called false prophets. They arose among the people, but the kings of Israel and Judah, the entire Jewish priesthood, most of the prophets in Israel, they had all utterly abandoned that shepherding heart of David. They'd left it

behind. They had totally forsaken the call of God to shepherd Israel, and God intends to restore all of that through his Son, this newborn baby Jesus Christ. And we have our first tip of the hand right here in this text.

So first point: Why Bethlehem? God wanted the Messiah born in Bethlehem because it is the city of David. It is the city of David. Bethlehem is called the city of David first by Luke as the narrator in verse 4, you see it there. And then by the Angel of the Lord in verse 11. Now, that may not strike you as strange because really it's so familiar to us. We read the story every year. We see that Bethlehem is called the city of David, but for Theophilus, who is the first reader of Luke's Gospel, and any other first-century reader of Luke's Gospel, calling Bethlehem the city of David is absolutely counterintuitive. You know how many other times Bethlehem is called the city of David in all of Scripture? Zero. None. Never. And that's significant because there are 47 uses of that designation, city of David, in the Bible, and Bethlehem is never called the city of David, except for these two verses right here. What city do we typically associate with the city of David? Jerusalem, right? But that is not the original city of David by any means.

Bethlehem is the city of David because it was, it was where he was born and raised. It's his home town. It's where David's family was from. Bethlehem was a small, small city, but it featured in Scriptures as the setting for the book of Ruth. You remember that book; four chapters, it's a wonderful story and very, very important theologically as well. But prior to the writing of the book of Ruth, prior to that story, Bethlehem shows up in Genesis. Jacob buried his wife Rachel in Bethlehem. It also shows up, Bethlehem shows up in the book of Judges a few times, but not in the most pleasant settings. Let's put it that way, I won't go into it, but the book of Ruth is set during the days of Judges. They're in the days of some very dark and sinful days. Every man was doing what was right in his own eyes and all of that. And that makes that narrative account of Ruth and Boaz just a very, very bright spot during a very dark time. Precious story, kinsman redeemer marrying this girl Ruth, a Moabitess. The book of Ruth is vital in the Biblical canon for another reason, though, not just teaching about the kinsman redeemer, not just a beautiful story set in a dark time, but it was also by divine authority, the book of Ruth establishes David's family

as belonging to the tribe of Judah. Without the book of Ruth, we would not know that. It's that important.

Back in Genesis 49:8 to 12, you don't need to turn there, but Jacob was blessing his sons at the end of his life. You remember that? He took everyone, blessed everyone, kind of prophesied about them and remarkably clear and accurate about every single one. And he prophesied that there would be a future dynasty that would rise in the tribe of Judah. And here are just a few of those verses. Jacob says, "Judah, your brothers shall praise you." How many of you boys out there would like to hear that? "Your brothers will praise you; your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies; your father's sons shall bow down before you. [...] The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor that ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples." So it's extending it beyond his brothers now to all the peoples. "Binding his foal to the vine and his donkey's colt to the choice vine, he has washed his garments in wine and his vesture in the blood of grapes." A lot prophesied in that. I'm not going to go into everything. I'm not going to unpack it, but I'm just showing, I'm

just telling you, I'm exercising restraint here, okay? You need to appreciate that.

But at the end of the book of Ruth, in connection with that in Genesis 49, here's what we find. Last three verses, "These are the generations of Perez." Remember, Perez was the son of Judah by Tamar. "These are the generations of Perez: Perez fathered Hezron, Hezron fathered Ram, Ram fathered Amminadab, Amminadab fathered Nahshon, Nahshon fathered Salmon, Salmon fathered Boaz, Boaz fathered Obed, Obed fathered Jesse, and Jesse fathered David." That genealogy does skip some generations here and there, but it names ten generations; ten names there spanning nearly 900 years. It starts with Perez, as I said, child of Judah by Tamar, moves through memorable points throughout Jewish history, times of the patriarchs, the exodus, the wilderness wanderings, times of the judges, times of Joshua the judges, right up to the time of the monarchy, right to there. Without that section, we would not be able to tie David back to Judah. We would not be able to establish David's right to rule in the tribe of Judah. It's established right there in this connection between Genesis 49 and Ruth 4.

Now turn over in your Bibles to 1 Samuel 16, and we want to get a look, a first look really, at David there in Bethlehem. This is the scene of David's anointing to be the king of Israel. The prophet Samuel, he anointed David as king over Israel in 1 Samuel 16:1. And at that time, it was a first anointing, it was a private anointing just conducted in the presence of David's father Jesse, before his mother, and his older brothers. "And the Lord God said to Samuel," 1 Samuel 16:1, "How long," Samuel, "will you grieve over Saul, since I have rejected him from being king over Israel? Fill your horn with oil, and go. I will send you to Jesse, the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons." Stop there for a second.

Samuel arrived, you remember, and Jesse, like any father would do, he paraded his older sons before Samuel starting with the oldest and going down the line. Impressive men, all of them, strong, strapping young men able to lead and to rule. Samuel was impressed with them. But look at verse 7, "God told Samuel, 'Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For the Lord sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.'" One after another, Jesse's sons passed before Samuel,

and one after another, God said, "no." He hadn't chosen any of them. Look at verse 11, "Then Samuel said to Jesse, 'Are all your sons here?' And he said, well 'There remains yet the youngest, but behold, he is,' What? 'keeping the sheep.' Samuel said to Jesse, 'Send and get him, for we will not sit down until he comes here.' Sent and brought him in. Now he," David, 'was ruddy and had beautiful eyes, was handsome and the Lord said, 'Arise, anoint him, for this is he.' Then Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the midst of his brothers." There's Genesis 49, right? "Anointed him in the midst of his brothers. And the Spirit of the Lord rushed upon David from that day forward."

He was an unstoppable force after that. There was no opposing David because if you oppose David, you're going to oppose God himself. Just a quick note on this section here, where Samuel takes a horn of oil and anoints David. You know what that little title Messiah means? It comes from the Hebrew verb, *māšah*. *Māšah* which means to anoint. Have you ever heard these back to our Jewish roots' kind of people? They say, they don't say, Jesus, they say, *Ha Mashuach*. And it sounds really holy and stuff. That's what they're talking about. *Ha* is just the

definite article, the, and then *Mashuach* is the proper, it's like a title, Messiah, Anointed One. *Ha Mashuach* it's the Messiah, it's the, the Anointed One. It identifies this one that God has chosen to be king. At first, as we can see right here, it's David. But ultimately, Jesus is *Ha Maschuach*. He's the Messiah, he is the Christ. Christ is from the verb *chrío*, in Greek, which means to anoint. So this is the Greek word for Anointed One and we get *Christos* from that. Christ.

So David, he was anointed, and he's the first to be anointed out of his family here, anointed there in Bethlehem. He's anointed privately, and he's anointed in the presence of his family, who were, by the way, shepherds. It was a family of shepherds. And David had to be called in from the pasture, notably, where he was tending sheep to be anointed king of Israel. With a little sanctified imagination, we can picture David walking the same ground as the shepherds of Luke, Chapter 2 verse 8. Following that same path, tending to his flocks, even by night. Even though David had been anointed king, Saul was still on the throne. But his anointing didn't give him any right to form a coup and overthrow Saul or anything like that. So, this is going to take some time. And as we've read in 1 Samuel,



there's a lot suffering, a lot of pain, a lot of travail, a lot of worry, a lot of anxious fleeing and hiding out, getting away from the murderous, demon-inspired jealousy of King Saul. Saul had to actually die before David could ascend the throne to rule over Israel. But it all started with Samuel's anointing, a private anointing, and the first of three times that David was anointed king.

That first anointing, though it was private, it started David's migration from the pasture to the throne, from Bethlehem to Jerusalem. David was being drawn away from shepherding the sheep and he was being put into wider service, more general service to shepherd all of Israel. David's second anointing happened after the death of Saul, when the men of Judah came to David at Hebron and anointed him king over the house of Judah. That's recorded in 2 Samuel 2 verse 4. The third and final time that David was anointed, he was this time anointed as king over all of Israel. You can turn there, it's in 2 Samuel 5:1. 2 Samuel 5:1. We'll read just a couple verses there. It says in 2 Samuel 5:1, "That all the tribes of Israel came to David at Hebron and said, 'Behold, we are your bone and flesh. In times past, when Saul was king over us, it was you who led out and brought in

Israel. And the Lord said to you, "You shall be shepherd of my people Israel and you shall be prince over Israel." So all the elders of Israel came to the king at Hebron, King David made a covenant with them at Hebron before the lord, and they," there it is again, "anointed David king over Israel."

After David is anointed king over all of Israel, he turns his attention to, as every new king does, to solidifying his power. To solidify his base of power, he needed to establish a centralized location from which to rule this unified kingdom that he's just become king over. His eyes turned to a city that was then inhabited by a Canaanite people called the Jebusites. They lived in the city called Jebuse. It's a name, by the way, that's been totally forgotten. Who calls it that anymore? We know the city is Jerusalem. Look at 2 Samuel 5:6. It says, "The king and his men went to Jerusalem against the Jebusites, the inhabitants of the land, who said to David, 'You will not come in here, but the blind and the lame will ward you off' —thinking, 'David cannot come in here.'" That's how impregnable they thought their fortress was, but look at the next verse. "Nevertheless, David took the stronghold of Zion, that is, the city of David." The city of David. That's the first mention, actually, of that

designation, city of David, in the Bible. And it doesn't refer to Bethlehem; notice, it refers to Jerusalem because that's where David lived as king of Israel. Verse 9 says, "David lived in the stronghold and he called it the city of David. And David built the city all around from Milo inward. And David became greater and greater, for the Lord, the God of hosts, was with him." He was with him ever since that first anointing all the way through Saul chasing him down, all the way through the days of ruling Judah, from Hebron for seven years and all the way through his rule over Israel, God was with him.

So Jerusalem was not only the city of David, it was the socio-religious center of the whole world, the whole planet. And that's how we know it today, right? Jerusalem is the city of David. It is the center of the Jewish faith. The Messiah is going to return and he's going to sit on David's throne in Jerusalem during the millennial kingdom; he's going to reign from there. And there is going to be a restored temple. Ezekiel 40 to 48 describes this temple in great detail, the sacrifices that take place there. There's going to be a restored temple in Jerusalem with restored sacrifices during the millennial kingdom. It's all going to happen. Even the Bible attests to

Jerusalem's importance as the center of the world. So much so that 45 out of 47 times, that appellation, city of David, it's talking about Jerusalem and not about Bethlehem. It's only in these two verses in Luke Chapter 2, verse 4 and verse 11 that Bethlehem is called the city of David. So what is the point? Why Bethlehem? Is this just nostalgia? Is this just an acknowledgment of David's warm-hearted sentiment for his hometown? It's more than that. It's at least that. It's definitely that, but it's more than that. Look, this is a return to where everything started. This is taking the story right back to its beginning. God wanted Jesus born in Bethlehem to break continuity with Israel's unfaithful leadership and then to establish continuity with David's leadership. God wanted to connect Jesus to his father David in every way possible. He wanted to push restart on the Davidic covenant and the Davidic program.