

Why the Bethlehem Shepherds, Part 2

Luke 2:1-20

November 29, 2015

David made a very, very good decision to choose Jerusalem as his capital city. Militarily, strategically it was the perfect location. Jerusalem was elevated above the surrounding valleys, which meant it was very well fortified. It had an abundant water supply, it was easily defensible, very strategically located, by the way, you know, located at the crossroads of north/south trade routes, centrally located in Israel. And, by the way, Israel is at the center of the entire inhabited world. It's the connecting point between east and west, between north and south of the entire planet. North, south, east, west, all points to the compass converge here on the map in Jerusalem, the city of David. The city actually remains at the center of the world to this very day, doesn't it? I mean hardly a day goes by that Jerusalem in some way, in some fashion, and in some form is not in the news. All of our eyes continue to be drawn back to that city as world history

continues to march toward the inevitable conclusion that God has planned for it. So we watch.

But even though David's public service took him to Jerusalem, his heart was always back home. David continued to long for his home town of Bethlehem even before he ascended the throne. While he was still in Saul's service, David returned home every single year to participate in annual sacrifices. You can see that referred to in 1 Samuel 20 verse 6, where it's called his city, his town. The annual sacrifices for David and for his family was kind of like a family reunion, in his family. It was like going home to him.

Well, all the people of Israel may have referred to Jerusalem as the city of David. David acquiesced to that as well. Though God had chosen Jerusalem to be at the very center of the Davidic Dynasty, to be at the very center of the location of the temple for all the socio-religious importance and significance of that city. For David, Bethlehem, Bethlehem was the city of David. It's located just six short miles southwest of Jerusalem. But God didn't allow David to return there. He was stuck in Jerusalem, and that was painful for David because he

loved Bethlehem. It was his city, his beloved home town, to him. He loved the tranquility. He loved the peace and quiet of the surrounding hills, the countryside where he would wander, tending his father's sheep. Out among those sheep the pastures, among the flocks, no one was hunting him down there, no arrows flying to kill him. There's no controversy, no slander, nothing to correct. He was free to look up at the night sky and contemplate the majesty of his Creator penning words like this in Psalm 8:3, "When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?" All that poured out of his heart because it was there in a quiet place of contemplation to look the majesty of God. But David wouldn't be allowed to return to the tranquility of Bethlehem, the city that was at the center of his heart. David would have to stay put in Jerusalem, which was the new city of David because God had chosen that city for himself.

David's home became even more permanently cemented in Jerusalem when the tabernacle moved there. David was right to bring the Ark of the Covenant up from the house of Abinadab and the house of Obed-Edom to Jerusalem. He was right to desire in 2

Samuel 7 to build a permanent temple for the ark. But God had clearly chosen Solomon for that project to build the temple. David, you're not going to be the one to build the temple; your son Solomon will do that. And Solomon did that. David supplied, David provided, David set everything up. Solomon did the building. Solomon executed. And when Solomon had finished that temple and dedicated it to the Lord, it says in 2 Chronicles 7:1 and 2, that "As soon as Solomon had finished his prayer, fire came down from heaven and it consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices, and the glory of the Lord filled the temple. And the priests could not enter the house of the Lord, because the glory of the Lord filled the Lord's house." And we're going to come back to that as we get into the next section. But for right now, the glory of the Lord filled that temple.

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.

You're already in 2 Samuel, right? So turn over to 2 Samuel Chapter 7, 2 Samuel 7, because this brings another angle to look at this conundrum, here, and it's found at the beginning of verse 8, in Chapter 2, Luke 2:8, "In the same region," what region? The region of Bethlehem. So there's Bethlehem, the city, the town, but then there's the region around it, and in that same region there were what? Shepherds. God wanted the Messiah born in close proximity to these shepherds, these shepherds in particular. These in the same region shepherds. And that brings us to the second point in our outline. Why the shepherds? Why the shepherds? As we read in Luke 2:1 to 20, as God brings the Messiah into the world, this greater son of David, the son of the Most High God, God is here making a point. This is not going to be a continuation of that which has developed over time. This is starting over. This is a break. Adam had failed as the representative head of the human race, and he brought sin and judgment and death into the world. So, God started over, bringing his sinless son into the world through a miraculous virgin birth. Solomon had likewise failed. He was supposed to continue David's reign and to continue it in the same manner, according to the same heart. Solomon was to be the representative head of the Davidic kingdom, a Messianic kingdom, a kingdom that was appointed and anointed and approved by God.

But Solomon didn't start, I mean he may have started well, but he did not continue well; he didn't continue in the heart of David, that's for sure.

So God started over. God anointed David's son, Jesus; brought him back to the starting point. He demonstrated his approval by connecting the birth of Christ to the birth of his father, David, in every way. It started here in Bethlehem; it started in the city of David. If you're in 2 Samuel 7, let your eyes scroll down the page a little bit to the middle of verse 8. God there tells the prophet Nathan to tell his servant David this, "I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep, that you should be prince over my people Israel. And I have been with you wherever you went and have cut off all your enemies from before you." Stop there for a second. We've noted earlier that when Samuel came to anoint David as king over Israel, they literally had to go out and find him and retrieve him from the pasture, from following the sheep. This is very accurate. And when David was finally elevated to the position of king over all of Israel, those tribes, tribal heads of Israel, the elders of Israel, they acknowledged David's call from God to be a shepherd

king. They said, "The Lord said," to you, "you shall be shepherd of my people Israel, you shall be prince over Israel."

So God intended for that shepherding mentality which characterized David's reign to characterize the entire Davidic dynasty. Shepherd leadership was to be the hallmark of the Messianic kingdom. So, continuing in verse 9, God says to David through Nathan, he says, "I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may dwell in their own place and be disturbed no more. And violent men shall afflict them no more, as formerly from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel. And I will give you rest from all of your enemies. Moreover, the Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house. And when your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your own body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be him a father, and he shall be to me a son. When he commits iniquity," obviously now we're not talking about Jesus Christ. We've separated from him and we're talking about Solomon.



“When he commits iniquity, I will discipline him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men, but my steadfast love will not depart from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you.” There’s that little caveat about Solomon and then this, verse 16, “Your house, your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever.”

Now, there had been, verse 14 there, it, it foreshadows a disruption in the continuity of David’s dynasty, doesn’t it? It foreshadows a break. Some kind of a severing that needed to be restored. God was with Solomon, David’s son, while he was faithful. But as soon as Solomon’s heart drifted into polygamy and idolatry, he departed from God. God stayed with him, though. God used him to write certain portions of Scripture that we, I read to my kids every day. But Solomon’s polygamy illustrated, and portended, foretold Israel’s spiritual polygamy, its wandering from the Lord to worship idols. Sadly, that idolatry characterized the nation from Solomon onward. And its leaders failed to shepherd God’s people. Prophet, priest, king, like I said, with a few notable exceptions to this, all of Israel’s leadership had abandoned shepherding the nation.

Just to show you that illustrated, turn over to Ezekiel's prophecy in chapter 34. Ezekiel 34. God here in Ezekiel 34, he summarizes his indictment against Israel's leadership. God intended the leaders to lead the people like David did, following his pattern. David was a shepherding ruler who cared for the people like sheep. He loved them with a shepherd's heart, but sadly, those who followed David, they were anything but shepherds. They were more like wolves, actually.

Take a look at Ezekiel 34 verse 1. "The word of the Lord came to me: 'Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy and say to them, even to the shepherds, "Thus says the lord God: 'Ah, shepherds of Israel who've been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothed yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd, and they became food for all the wild beasts. My sheep were

scattered; they wandered all over the mountains and on every high hill. My sheep were scattered all over the face the earth, with none to search and seek for them.' Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord: 'As I live, declares the Lord God, surely because my sheep have become a prey, and because my sheep have become food for all the wild beasts, since there was no shepherd and because my shepherds have not searched for my sheep, but the shepherds have fed themselves, and not fed my sheep'; therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord: Thus says the Lord God, 'Behold, I am against the shepherds, and I will require my sheep at their hand and put a stop to their feeding the sheep. No longer shall the shepherds feed themselves. I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, that they may not be food for them.'"

To see what the kingdom of Israel had become after David's death; it would have made David weep. It would have absolutely broken his heart. One time, you may know the story, when David's own sin of taking his own personal census, by the way, when he counted his troops and he brought down a plague in judgment on the people of Israel, David pleaded with the Lord. 2 Samuel 24:17, "Behold, I have sinned, and I have done wickedly. But

these sheep, what have they done? Please let your hand be against me and against my father's house." David would have hated to see what had become of Israel, what had become of the throne, what had become of Jerusalem itself. It would have broken his heart. It certainly broke the heart of God. But God had a plan to remedy the situation. Look at verse 11. "For thus says the Lord God: 'Behold I, I, myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all the places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. And I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and I will bring them into their own land. And I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the ravines, and in all the inhabited places of the country. I will feed them with good pasture and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be there grazing land. There they shall lie down in good grazing land, on rich pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down,' declares the Lord God. 'I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice.'"

Stop there. Actually, skip down to verse 22. God continues, he says, “I will rescue my flock. They shall no longer be a prey. And I will judge between sheep and sheep. And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the Lord, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them. I am the Lord; I have spoken. I will make with them a covenant of peace and banish wild beasts from the land, so they may dwell securely in the wilderness and sleep in the woods. And I will make them and the places all around my hill a blessing, and I will send down the showers in their season; they shall be showers of blessing. And the trees of the field shall yield their fruit,” that is uncultivated trees, by the way, they shall yield their fruit, “the earth shall yield its increase, they shall be secure in their land. And they shall know that I am the Lord, when I break the bars of their yoke, and deliver them from the hand of those who’ve enslaved them. They shall no longer be a prey to the nations, nor shall the beasts of the land devour them. They shall dwell securely; none shall make them afraid. And I will provide for them renowned plantations so that they shall no more be consumed with hunger in the land, and no longer suffer the reproach of the nations. And they shall know that I

am the Lord their God with them, that they, the house of Israel, are my people declares the Lord God. And you are my sheep, human sheep of my pasture, and I am your God," declares the Lord God."

Why the shepherds? Because God's heart is the heart of a shepherd. As we read earlier in Psalm 23, God loves his people. He cares for them. He feeds them. He tends them. He pays attention to all of the details of their health and their growth and their development just as a diligent shepherd carefully, attentively cares for his sheep. By bringing Joseph and Mary back to Bethlehem, the city of David, God broke the continuity with the kings of Israel, those who were described here in Ezekiel 34 in a negative way. He broke that continuity. This is consistent with his indictment of Jerusalem, its leadership, its priests, its kings. There is nothing to affirm in that corrupt city. It just needs to be wadded up and thrown into the garbage bin and lit on fire. And in AD 70, that's exactly what happened.

So of course, God didn't want the imagery of the palace as the setting for the birth of the Messiah. He didn't want the imagery of Jerusalem with all its corruption to be the setting of the birth of the Messiah. He wanted the imagery of the

pasture, of the shepherd because that's what God intended to restore through his son, the Messiah, Jesus the Christ. God connected Jesus with his father, David, causing him to be born in Bethlehem, the original city of David, at the center of David's heart, and by putting him in close proximity to these Bethlehem shepherds.

Now, all that to say this, let's tie this all together, why Bethlehem? Why the shepherds? Look at the context of Micah's prophecy if you can read quick. In Micah 5:2, Micah 5:2, we usually only read verse 2 of Micah's prophecy because we read it around Christmas time every time. But the context surrounding that tells us everything. We can start in Micah 5:2. It says this, "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 of old, from ancient days." Now we're talking about an eternal person there, aren't we? "Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has given birth and then the rest of his brothers shall return to the people of Israel." That right there, in that verse, is like the reference to the interval between the first and second advents of Christ. There will be a,

at the end, a gathering of Israel just prior to the start of the millennial kingdom. But then this in verse 4, “And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God, and they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth. And,” verse 5, “he shall be their peace.” Stop there.

The angels in heaven said it on that day to the shepherds, in Luke 2:14, “Glory to God in the highest and on earth” what? “Peace.” He shall be their peace, on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased. God is truly glorified when the true nature of his heart is revealed, and whenever God is glorified, when his shepherding heart is revealed, his people dwell securely, just as Micah predicted. And that’s what Luke wants us to see here. God shall be their peace. On earth, there is peace among those with whom he is pleased. Bethlehem, home to families of shepherds, surrounded as a city by pastures and flocks of sheep, provide the perfect setting, the right imagery, to picture the safety, the security, the provision, the protection of God through the righteous shepherd like the reign of the Messiah. And that’s why it had to be Bethlehem, the original city of David. That’s why this announcement from the Angel of the Lord



had to come first to the shepherds, because that's the kind of imagery that's most fitting for the birth of the Chief Shepherd, 1 Peter 5:4; the birth of the great shepherd of the sheep, Hebrews 13:20.

Listen, does that encourage you to know that the heart of your God is the heart of a shepherd? That he looks after us. I know that sheep, you know we call them dumb animals and all that kind of stuff and it's not very flattering that we're called his sheep but, hey, if the shoe fits, you know. But really, I mean let's, let's reverse that. Let's not look at all of our flaws. We've got them. We've got flaws. And we, like sheep, can do some really dumb things, okay? But let's flip it around and look at the fact that if we're sheep, you know what that means he is the shepherd. And, and you know what? He's omniscient. And he sees absolutely everything and he cares. Peter says, "Cast all of your cares upon him because he cares for you." He sees everything. Not only that, but he's also omnipotent, which means he's got the power to do something about it when there's trouble. He can make us, like Psalm 23 says, he can make us even in valleys of shadows of death feel very secure. He can even set a table, a dinner table, a feast table right in the presence of our

enemies. Right in front of them. And we can have just a wonderful time filled with rich, rich joy in the worship of our God right in the presence of conflict and controversy and slander and persecution and all the rest. God is our shepherd, that's what we're seeing in Luke Chapter 2. That's why Bethlehem. That's why the shepherds. Let's close in prayer.

Father, we just want to thank you that you are our great shepherd. We love you dearly, and we're so grateful to see this unfold before us. We're so grateful to see the layers underneath the story that help us appreciate what's at stake here, help us appreciate your heart, your character. We love you. We give ourselves even more willingly to you knowing the truth of your word. Please bind our hearts to you. I know, like we sang before, our hearts can be prone to wander, but bind them to you in the truth. Bind them to you by the Spirit. Bind them to you with your love. Let us be those who manifest that love that you've shown to us through Christ. Let us be those that manifest that love to the whole world around us because they so desperately need it. It's a dark day, dark times that we live in, but you've raised us up for such a time as this and we want to be faithful in it. We commit all this to you in worship and



praise and honor of your son, the Lord Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.