

God Is In Control

This morning's passage is most likely the best-known story in the Bible. The story is simple and takes place on a night that was like every other night – dark. Yet it was like no other night in the history of the world for eternal light of salvation came into the darkness of the world. In the small village of Bethlehem, with the population estimated to be about the same as the village of Tijeras - around 400 to 500 people, a child was born. Listing the resume of this child only scratches the surface of who He is in totality. Jesus was the only begotten Son of the Living God, deity in human flesh, Israel's long-awaited Messiah, eternal Creator of the universe, Savior of mankind and the eternal Word of God in the flesh dwelling among mankind. The list could go on. We read about the eve of this first Christmas; there were not presents for the wise men arrived later. That first Christmas was marked by the birth of the incarnate God, the focus was on God's plan of salvation for the world through His Son.

There are many theories as to how December 25th came to be the celebration of the birth of Christ. What the actual day was is not important – it is the event of Christ's birth that is important. Observing December 25th as Christmas appears in the historical records for the first time in the Chronography of 354 A.D. It was a 4th century calendar produced for a wealthy Roman Christian named Valentinus and was a calendar that included beautiful illustrations. This brings the problem to the surface - we have been observing December 25th as the celebration of Christ's birth for at least 1,664 years and over that time the focus has shifted from Christ the Savior to the giving of presents by the end of the 18th century, kissing under the mistletoe, the introduction of the Christmas tree in the mid 16th century northern Europe, the introduction of Saint Nicholas or Santa Claus from Scandinavian countries and the hanging of stockings on the fireplace mantel - all these traditions were brought to

America by emigrants from Europe. Today Christmas the holiday is the largest commercial venture of each year in contrast to the 1st Christmas being about the birth of the Christ.

I think of Martin Luther's confession, "When I am told that God became a man, I can follow the idea, but I just do not understand what it means. For what man, if left to his natural promptings, if he were God, would humble himself to lie in the feedbox of a donkey or hang upon the cross? God laid upon Christ the iniquities of us all. This is that ineffable and infinite mercy of God which the slender capacity of man's heart cannot comprehend and much less utter – that unfathomable depth and burning zeal of God's love toward us." It is my desire this morning we journey back in time to recognize the truth of Luther's words and even travel further back to Mary and Joseph, the angels and the shepherds to that night that changed everything. I hope you see God' plan unfolded exactly as He determined and as he controlled for this is the fulfilled promise of God, given to Mary by the angel Gabriel, and the fulfillment of prophecies from the Old Testament.

Of His World

To understand God's control and that his plan was fulfilled in spite of the efforts of the prince of this world and of fallen man we need to understand the background of what Luke writes. We need to see how God controlled the events of the world. Beginning in chapter 2, verse 1, "In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. ² This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³ And all went to be registered, each to his own town." You may not be aware of the controversy sounding these verses. Critics and unbelievers use these verses to try to prove the Bible false. We will examine some of these surface problems of various dates.

God's plan was fulfilled by his moving the heart of the most powerful man in the known world, the Caesar of the Roman Empire, who Luke names as "Caesar Augustus". Caesar lived 1450 miles away in Rome and he knew nothing of God's Word, his purposes or his plan of salvation. Yet, God moved Caesar to play a crucial role for the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy by ordering a census. There is little extra-biblical evidence to support the taking of this census and therefore critics say Luke has his facts all out of order because this story is fabricated. However, the Jewish historian Josephus recorded that at this time the Jewish people were compelled to swear an oath to Caesar and to accomplish this a census might have been taken. In addition Tertullian, the 2nd century author wrote that Saturninus, governor of Syria ordered a census in 6 B.C. two years ahead of Christ's birth.

All indications are that Jesus was born in 4 B.C. Why is the Gregorian Calendar created in 1582 by Pope Gregory the XIII that we use to this day off by 4 years? That is a whole other teaching. So please trust me that I did the research and it is off. Critics think this gap in time between 6 B.C. when Caesar ordered the census and 4 B.C. when Jesus was born proves Luke's story false. However there was not the instantaneous spread of information that we have today. Information traveled by horse, foot and boat. It is not unreasonable for the Caesar to have ordered the census in 6 B.C. and that he sent the order to the governor of Syria who then sent the order to Herod who ruled Palestine from 37 B.C. to 4 A.D., who then gave the order to the leaders of the Roman garrison. This process could have easily taken up the time difference and the census was not been fully carried out until 4 B.C. Censuses were not uncommon and were taken by many rulers for many reasons at many different times throughout the ancient world.

In addition to the time differential many critics say there was no reason for Joseph to return to his tribal home of Bethlehem. But again there is evidence to the contrary. There is also an early 2nd century document from Egypt showing that

Egyptians were required to return to their home area for the census just as Joseph and Mary returned to Joseph's ancestral home of Bethlehem. So this practice was not unheard of in the ancient Middle East. Further as Herod, who was not a Jew, desperately wanted the approval of the Jewish people, he would have been sensitive to the tribal structure of Israel when he executed the census.

We observe God providentially managed the events of Caesar in Rome, the governor of Syria and the king of Israel as written in the Proverbs, [“The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will.”](#) (Proverbs 21:1) Through God's orchestration of people and events Joseph and Mary ended up in the City of David called Bethlehem in order for the Messiah's birth to fulfill prophecy given to Micah, 700 years earlier he wrote, [“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.”](#) (Micah 5:2) At this time Bethlehem was not considered important, but there were a few notable events in regards to Bethlehem - it was where Rachel died and Jacob placed a pillar over her tomb. (Genesis 35:19) The only king or ruler to come from Bethlehem was David who ruled about 1000 B.C. and Micah's prophecy came 300 years later. Once David left Bethlehem there is no evidence he ever returned. The prophecy of Micah could not have been about David as some claim because it came 300 years after David died; therefore, it had to be about the coming of the Messiah.

As a historian Luke gives dates and background to show his careful research and to set the stage for the events he wrote about. Luke was also careful to show that God was in charge, not man. I want you to know and be fully confident that the writing of Luke can be fully trusted for God inspired it.

Of His Nation

Lets bring our focus down from the known world or the Roman Empire to the national level with what happen within Israel and observe what Luke wants us, his readers, to understand. Reading from verse 4, “[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, ⁵ to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.](#)” Here again critics say these details are over-kill by way of too much detail in an effort by Luke to gain support for his false account. They ask what kind of man would require his late-term pregnant wife to travel 70 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem? This would not have been an easy journey for Mary and could have taken 7 to 10 days. The naysayers claim that as the head of the household Joseph could have registered for his whole family. However, historical documents from Syria, and we need to note that at this time Israel was part of the Syrian province, required women of 12 years and older be subject to the national tax and therefore they needed to participate in the census. So here might be one reason Mary went with Joseph. However, another reason might have been their betrothal. Remember at this time by their betrothal Joseph and Mary were considered husband and wife and the betrothal could only be dissolved by a divorce. The marriage was not consummated during the betrothal that lasted a minimum of 1 year and consummation happened on the wedding night. Joseph and Mary had not consummated the marriage and to leave his pregnant betrothed behind in Nazareth could have exposed Mary to shame and ridicule. Remember, even Joseph had intended to put Mary away until the angel appeared to him and told him it was by the Holy Spirit of God that Mary conceived. Finally, because the whole nation was anxiously awaiting the Messiah both Joseph and Mary would have known of Micah’s prophesy concerning Bethlehem as the birthplace of the Messiah. If Mary believed the angel and we have no reason to believe

otherwise, she would have known she needed to go to Joseph's home city and give birth to her son in Bethlehem.

Of His People

Luke has written of the most profound event in the history of mankind in straightforward and matter-of-fact style. He began with how God controlled people and events of the known world so that his plan of salvation would happen just as he had predicted through his prophets. Then Luke brought the control of God down to the national level of Israel and beginning in verse 6 he brings us to the people God chose to be involved and present in this miracle of miracles. Taking up our passage in verse 6, “[And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. ⁷ 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.](#)” These verses begin what is by far the largest portion of our passage because even though God is the Creator and maintainer of the universe and he has always been a God of details, his is also the God who loves and is concerned with each individual person.

Notice that verse 6 does not tell us how long Joseph and Mary had been in Bethlehem when she gave birth. So while most stories and movies show Joseph and Mary barely making it to the manger, the truth is neither Matthew nor Luke tells us how long they were there. Bethlehem very well could have been packed with people because of the census and instead of returning to Nazareth they stayed for Mary to give birth and the baby Jesus to settle in. Remember Bethlehem was the size of the village of Tijeras and how many inns do we find here. So for Joseph and Mary to have to find lodgings wherever they could is reasonable.

As Mary gives “[birth to her firstborn son](#)” there are other events taking place, but also note that Luke is saying Jesus was Mary's “[firstborn son](#)” meaning there were others that followed, otherwise Jesus would have been Mary's only son just as the

Scriptures tell us that Jesus was the only Son of God the Father. John recorded Jesus saying, “For God so loved the world, that He gave **His only begotten Son**, that **whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.**” (John 3:16) Matthew makes this clear when he wrote about Jesus coming to his hometown of Nazareth and teaching in the synagogue. People were astonished by his knowledge of the scriptures and they asked, “Is not this the carpenter’s son? Is not His mother called Mary, and His brothers, **James and Joseph and Simon and Judas?** And His sisters, are they not all with us? Where then *did* this man *get* all these things?” (Matthew 13:55-56) The Bible is clear on this matter and Mary was not a virgin her entire life and after the birth of Jesus she and Joseph experienced a normal marriage.

Now while Mary is giving birth to Jesus there are other things happening as orchestrated and controlled by God. We do not find it in Luke’s account, but Matthew tells us, “**Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, magi** (*The Magi were a caste of wise men specializing in astronomy, astrology, and natural science. Most likely from the area known today as Iran.*) **back to our verse the magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem.**” (Matthew 2:1) These magi followed the Messiah’s star placed by God in the heavens to bring them to Israel, to Jerusalem and then to Bethlehem. Again, we do not know how long after Jesus’ birth it was that they arrived in Bethlehem or how long they stayed.

At the time Jesus was being born God orchestrated another amazing event! Luke writes beginning inverse 8, “**And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.** ⁹ **And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear.** ¹⁰ **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.** ¹¹ **For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.** ¹² **And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.”** ¹³ **And suddenly there was**

with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, ¹⁴“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”

Traditionally shepherds had their flocks in the fields from April to November, but there are examples in historical writings of the flocks being in the fields all year – so December 25th was chosen to celebrate Christ’s birth much later and for various reasons we are not sure of and the season may or may not be the right season. What was interesting as I studied was that I found out that between Jerusalem and Bethlehem, a distance of about 6 miles, is where traditionally the flocks were kept that were used for the temple sacrifices. It is possible then that God was showing these shepherds of the flocks used for temple sacrifices that the final sacrifice had now arrived?

During the day the shepherds would move the flocks through the open fields to graze, but at night the flocks were brought back to the sheepfold, an enclosed area, for their safety and making it easy for the shepherds to take turns watching the flocks. The night was the perfect time for the angel to appear, as the shepherds would have been gathered together for the night.

It is night and the shepherds are gathered together around a fire and talking, as men often do about the business of life; the price of sheep at the market, the condition of the grass, the cost of providing for their families, etc. In the country away from the lights of cities where it is dark the stars shine brightly and you can see the Milky Way. Suddenly in this relaxed and peaceful time appears an angel with as Luke writes the glory of the Lord shining around it. If I had been there it certainly would have brought fear into my heart.

Even though the angel speaks out beginning in verse 10, saying, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹ For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹² And this

will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” I am not sure at this point the shepherds still would have been trembling in their sandals. The entire nation of Israel was anxiously awaiting the Messiah. They wrongly thought he would be a king that would be a strong military leader and vanquish the Romans from Israel and make Israel a great nation as it had once been. These shepherds would have been aware of this anticipation of the Messiah or as Luke uses the Greek name “Christ the Lord.” Can you image the privilege and blessing of being told you are to be allowed to see the Messiah before anyone else? These shepherds would also have known the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem in order to fulfill Micah’s prophecy.

As the impact of what the angel has told them is beginning to settle in and as Socrates the Greek philosopher who did not believe in the multitude of Greek gods but in a God, said 400 years earlier “Wonder is the beginning of wisdom.” As these shepherds were wondering over what the angel had said to them the sky is no longer filled with the stars but “suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, ¹⁴ ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!’ ” Now, that would have brought any man to his knees as the complete awe of God sank in. As the angels disappeared the shepherds excitedly began talking saying, “ ‘Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.’ ” ¹⁶ And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger.” As shepherds they would not have left their flocks unattended. What would it have felt like to be the “low-man on the totem pole” and ordered to stay behind and watch the flocks? And for the rest what would it have been like to arrive in Bethlehem and find the Messiah just as the angel had said they would. They shared with Joseph and Mary what they had seen and what the angel had told them. Just another miracle of God to reassure Joseph and Mary that their son was the Messiah and to support this truth by having

“the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them” (v. 2:20) and telling everyone they knew of what they had seen and what they had heard from an angel of God.

Having God control all these things to bring about his plan of salvation just as he had revealed it in the scriptures and through men recognized as his prophets by Israel and adding angels and the testimony of shepherds surely is why “Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart.” (v. 2:19)

We have seen Joseph and Mary’s obedience up to this point and they continue being obedient for “at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.” (v. 2:21)

My beloved, this record gives us truth supported by evidence and witnesses. It shows how God used the mightiest of rulers and the most common of people for the most glorious event in history. It shows us obedience to God results in a multitude of wonders of God’s plan of salvation revealed and taking place. Joseph and Mary did not know the future, but were obedient – you and I do not know the future or how God will use the mightiest people of the world and common things of life and the common people to further his plan of salvation, but the questions for us is, “Will be obedient as Joseph and Mary were? Do we recognize the spiritual world of God is just as real as the physical world we occupy? Will we live by faith for the glory of God?” I pray the answer to these questions for each of us and for us as a church is “Yes!” So, let us live for the glory of God and like Mary ponder in our hearts all that God has revealed and like the shepherds with excitement talk of God and his Son Jesus Christ, and share the gospel of salvation with anyone who will listen.

