

The first of November is traditional All Saints Day, a day when we remember those who devoted their lives to serving Jesus. More recently the first Sunday of November has been called the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church. Just a week ago eleven people were murdered in a synagogue, simply because they were worshiping the same God whom we worship, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. On a more joyful note, God has answered our prayers for the release of Asia Bibi in Pakistan after she received a death sentence for supposedly blaspheming Mohamed. She had been imprisoned for nine years, apart from her husband and five children. Now we need to pray for the believers in Pakistan as radicals have threatened to kill her family and retaliate against believers because of her release. Let us take a moment of silence to remember the eleven who were killed as they worshiped in a synagogue in Pittsburg and pray for their families as well as those around the world living under the constant threat of persecution and thank God for Bibi Asia's release.

Luke began his gospel by giving us some information the other gospel writers did not include. He tells of prophecies from various sources, an angel, a priest, and two women. In this chapter we'll see three more prophecies, one from another angel, and one from an elderly man, and we'll be introduced to a prophetess. The prophecies are filled with allusions to Scripture. Luke is helping his readers to see that these supernatural events are not a break from the Law and the prophets, but rather a fulfillment of their messages (Luke 24:44<sup>i</sup>). He has told us the forerunner of the Messiah was born and that Mary was chosen by God to give birth to the Messiah.

*<sup>1</sup> In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. <sup>2</sup> This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria.* Luke 2:1-2 Caesar Augustus was the great-nephew of Julius Caesar. After securing his power by defeating Antony and Cleopatra, the senate gave him the title Augustus, a title only previously used for the gods. Some cities made their calendar begin on his birthday, but it was his death that set the world's dating to A.D. and B.C. Many began referring to him as savior. One inscription refers to him as the savior of the world. Luke begins to tell of the birth of Jesus by reminding us that one type of savior was on his way out as another type of savior was arriving. How different God's perspective is from man's!

Scholars debate about the historicity of Quirinius being governor of Syria at the time and whether the registration decree happened at that exact time. Since we don't know the exact year Jesus was born, it is inconsequential. We do know that both were true in the decade in which Jesus was born. Luke is reminding us that these events are real and took place at an exact time in human history.

*<sup>3</sup> And all went to be registered, each to his own town. <sup>4</sup> 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, <sup>5</sup> to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.* Luke 2:3-5 The peace of Rome came about at a price, the taxation of even the smallest of villages far from the capital. Joseph and

Mary had to go to the town of their ancestors to be registered for taxation. It was an eighty-mile journey and Mary's pregnancy was almost full term. Many in the town would have had to make the same journey being from the clan of David. Perhaps someone would have taken pity and lent a donkey or let her ride on a cart, but then again, they were suspicious of how she became pregnant and may have shunned her. As hard as the journey would have been for her, she knew something they did not. The babe in her was holy, the Son of the Most High (1:35<sup>ii</sup>). She knew God exalts the poor and humble.

*<sup>6</sup> And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. <sup>7</sup> 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. Luke 2:6-7 I would imagine the journey of that distance could have brought on the beginning of labor at any point in the journey, but God sovereignly kept that moment from happening until they arrived in Bethlehem that the prophecy of Micah would be fulfilled. <sup>2</sup> 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*

I think it is helpful for us to picture where this was and the real setting. Mary is a young exhausted teen. The labor pains begin and there is nowhere for privacy in this small town now crowded with David's descendants. Every dwelling and stall was occupied. All that was available is a corner of a manger, which was perhaps a shepherds' tower on the outskirts of town, Migdal Eder. It was a watchtower where newborn lambs were kept from the cold. The acrid smell of the straw and animal waste came with every breath. How could this be? The couple had to wonder why the holy one would be born in this filthy condition. Joseph had to assist the birth. Mary's strength had to be pushed to her very limits. And then Joseph's hands held the blood covered newborn. How did he know what to do? The joy of the birth surely overcame the conditions, but then reality had to come crashing back in. What now? How do they, humble as they are, even suspect by their kin, raise the holy Son of God?

Mary tenderly wrapped him in swaddling cloths. The word in Greek means strips of material used to wrap lambs unlike the sheets of material used to wrap human babies. It was a tradition that newborns be salted and wrapped up tight. Then they placed Him in the feed trough using it for a crib.

Towering nearby was a massive volcano like mound, the Herodium, built by Herod the Great. Inside were gardens, baths, and palace rooms. What a contrast the world's rulers make with this humble family sheltered in a manger. We are often confused by this contrast in our world. The enemy of our soul wants us to think success is power, influence, prestige, wealth and everything that inflates our egos. But the story of God choosing this humble couple and **the birthplace of God in the flesh remind us that things are never as they appear.** God's values are so different from the what the world values. We must always remind ourselves of this for it is always trying to lure us in the wrong direction.

*<sup>8</sup> And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. <sup>9</sup> 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.* Luke 2:8-9 Why would an angel of the Lord announce the birth of the Savior to these shepherds? After all, shepherds were considered as unreliable witnesses, like third class citizens. It does fit with the humble setting.

There is another way to see this event. A prophecy in Micah may give us a hint as to who these shepherds were. It is not the prophecy we normally think of related to Bethlehem, the one the scribes spoke of as the birth place of the Messiah (Micah 5:2<sup>iii</sup>). It is in the previous chapter of Micah, *<sup>8</sup> And you, O tower of the flock, hill of the daughter of Zion, to you shall it come, the former dominion shall come, kingship for the daughter of Jerusalem.* Micah 4:8 The former dominion is alluding to the reign of David over the surrounding nations. It points to the One who would reign on David's throne forever (Isaiah 9:7<sup>iv</sup>). This tower of the flock is called Migdal Eder and was near the place of Rachel's burial (Genesis 35:19-21<sup>v</sup>). The Mishna (Oral Torah) tells us that the shepherds near this tower were priests who cared for unblemished lambs to be used in the daily and Feast Day sacrifices. Jewish tradition also confirms that this would be the place from which the Messiah would come.

*<sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.* Luke 2:10-11 Angels often have to tell their audience to not fear. They are such awesome creatures that the sight of one causes the strongest warrior to tremble (2 Kings 19:35<sup>vi</sup>). They don't need to fear because the angel had come to bring good news of great joy for *all* people. The good news is the term for the gospel, (Matthew 11:5<sup>vii</sup>).

We get lots of bad news. In fact, the media knows bad news sells. And bad news can really get us focused on the temporal passing world. But this good news has eternal significance and far outweighs the worst news. We need to remember that! Behind every problem we face there is still the eternally good news of the grace that has come to us in Jesus (John 1:4<sup>viii</sup>).

We also need to remember that this is the source of great joy. If we could see what God has planned for those who love Him and have received His forgiveness in Christ, we would have smiles nothing could erase (1 Corinthians 2:9<sup>ix</sup>). It is spiritually healthy to think on heaven. What will it be like to be in a place where everyone is holy and loving and generous, including you and me? What will it be like to walk up to Jesus and look into His eyes and see the receipt for our sins in those holes in His hands and feet? What will it be like to have a perfect voice and sing with angels and be overwhelmed with the glory of God again and again? Jesus said, *<sup>33</sup> "I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world."* John 16:33 This world can be full of tribulation, but in the midst of it all we can have peace and great joy because Jesus has overcome the world.

He defeated evil. He lived a perfect life and He takes our sins and gives us His righteousness if we are willing to make that exchange (2 Corinthians 5:21<sup>x</sup>).

The reason the angel gave for the great joy is that a Savior was born, Messiah the Lord. The time had come. The nation was anticipating it. John the Baptist would be announcing it. Only what they hoped for was more along the lines of the Second Coming. Even now, some Christians think the Second Coming is greater than the first because of how it will affect our daily lives. They are looking for the outward things like peace with people, our heavenly home, and rest. But we must remember all that will be ours then is just the outward blessing that comes from what the angels were proclaiming. The Lamb of God came into the world to save us from the justice our rebellion against God deserves. It's only because of the first coming that we can look forward to the Second Coming. How we need to let Christ live through us right now (Colossians 1:27<sup>xi</sup>)!

*12 And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.*” Luke 2:12 According to some sources those lambs that were chosen for sacrifice by the priestly shepherds at Migdal Eder were wrapped in swaddling strips of clothes to keep them from harming themselves.<sup>xii</sup> That may be why the shepherds understood the direction of the angel to go find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes. It is quite possible that Jesus was born either in a shepherd's cave near the tower of Eder or even in the tower, as the tower was also considered to be a manger of sorts. It is also quite possible that those shepherds were priests who raised sacrificial lambs. Their announcement to others was said to cause wonder. That would more likely if they were the priestly shepherds raising unblemished lambs for sacrifices.

*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!"* Luke 2:13-14 Glory to God! That is what it is all about. That is the culmination of all things (1 Peter 4:11<sup>xiii</sup>). God is glorified when His attributes are seen and appreciated for the perfection that they are. That He would send His only beloved Son into this world to save us self-centered rebels shows us the glory of His love. No wonder John said that God is love (1 John 4:8<sup>xiv</sup>).

Now consider the message to us. *"On earth peace among those with whom He is pleased."* Peace is a state of the heart that is free from worry and fear (John 14:27<sup>xv</sup>). It is to not be anxious about anything (Philippians 4:6<sup>xvi</sup>). That is really what I have been speaking of regarding seeing our daily lives from a heavenly perspective rather than an earthly one. God is pleased with those who trust Him and His solution to our sin debt, which is Jesus' death in our place on the cross. Do you know this peace, or are you caught up in the anxiety of the temporal things that are passing away?

I noticed something I'd never seen before in the wording of this verse. The angels are proclaiming peace *among* those with whom God is pleased. The word Greek word for among can mean *in* and *to* as well as among. We are to be at peace not only within ourselves and with God but with one another as well. That is similar to Jesus' prayer

that we be one (John 17:22-23<sup>xvii</sup>). Our unity and peace is God's will for all believers, for we are one in Jesus. We may differ on what is to be done or how, or even on interpretation of peripheral doctrines, but that should not interfere with our peace with one another. Peace is more important than chairs or pews or hymns or choruses or any offenses. Whatever decisions are made, the most important decision is that we love one another and remain at peace, for we know that is God's will (Mark 9:50<sup>xviii</sup>). If we're at peace with God, we will be at peace with one another.

*15 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."* *16 And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger.* Luke 2:15-16 When angels went from them into heaven and the shepherds decided to immediately go see the baby just as the angels had suggested. They knew they would find Him in Bethlehem for the angel said He was born in the city of David. So they quickly went, perhaps to that tower at Migdal Eder from the mention of swaddling clothes.

*17 And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. 18 And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.* Luke 2:17-18 This makes me think it is likely they *were* priestly shepherds whose announcement would be more likely to be received. Is this possibly one reason John the Baptist referred to Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world (John 1:29<sup>xix</sup>)?

*19 But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart.* Luke 2:19 What a task God had given to Mary! Did she know of the Suffering Servant Songs of Isaiah? She would soon hear Simeon tell her a sword would pierce her heart (Luke 2:35<sup>xx</sup>). In other words, there were painful things to come, despite Simeon declaring Jesus to be <sup>32</sup> *"a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel."* Luke 2:32 She had to wonder what it all meant and how it would come to pass.

*20 And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.* Luke 2:20 And now it has been told to you. If we believe the angels' words, we too should be glorifying and praising God for what we have just heard, what Luke has passed on to us. Have you received the Good News? Is your heart filled with great joy? If you have the eternal perspective and know the peace that is ours in Jesus, it certainly will be! Let us glorify God by allowing Him to be born in us, living in and through us each day. Let us walk in the Spirit and keep the fire in our hearts brightly burning. Let us share this Good News at every opportunity. *17 ... the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.* 1 John 2:17

Questions: 1 Describe Mary's Journey? 2 Why Bethlehem? 3 What contrast was before them? Lesson? 4 Who might the shepherd's be? 5 Why might Migdal Eder be the birthplace? 6 Who is the good news for? 7 Why should we have great joy? 8 How else do we benefit from Jesus' birth? 9 What clue may have sent the shepherds to Migdal Eder? 10 How can we glorify God for the wonder of incarnation?

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<sup>i</sup> **Luke 24:44 (ESV)**

<sup>44</sup> Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled."

<sup>ii</sup> **Luke 1:35 (ESV)**

<sup>35</sup> And the angel answered her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God.

<sup>iii</sup> **Micah 5:2 (ESV)**

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>iv</sup> **Isaiah 9:7 (ESV)**

<sup>7</sup> Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

<sup>v</sup> **Genesis 35:19-21 (ESV)**

<sup>19</sup> So Rachel died, and she was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem), <sup>20</sup> and Jacob set up a pillar over her tomb. It is the pillar of Rachel's tomb, which is there to this day. <sup>21</sup> Israel journeyed on and pitched his tent beyond the tower of Eder.

<sup>vi</sup> **2 Kings 19:35 (ESV)**

<sup>35</sup> And that night the angel of the LORD went out and struck down 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians. And when people arose early in the morning, behold, these were all dead bodies.

<sup>vii</sup> **Matthew 11:5 (ESV)**

<sup>5</sup> the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them.

<sup>viii</sup> **John 1:4 (ESV)**

<sup>4</sup> In him was life, and the life was the light of men.

<sup>ix</sup> **1 Corinthians 2:9 (ESV)**

<sup>9</sup> But, as it is written, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him"—

<sup>x</sup> **2 Corinthians 5:21 (ESV)**

<sup>21</sup> For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

<sup>xi</sup> **Colossians 1:27 (ESV)**

<sup>27</sup> To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

<sup>xii</sup> <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/faithwalkers/2012/12/was-jesus-born-away-in-a-manger-at-migdal-eder/>

<sup>xiii</sup> **1 Peter 4:11 (ESV)**

<sup>11</sup> whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

<sup>xiv</sup> **1 John 4:8 (ESV)**

<sup>8</sup> Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.

<sup>xv</sup> **John 14:27 (ESV)**

<sup>27</sup> Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.

<sup>xvi</sup> **Philippians 4:6 (ESV)**

<sup>6</sup> do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

<sup>xvii</sup> **John 17:22-23 (ESV)**

<sup>22</sup> The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one,

<sup>23</sup> I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.

<sup>xviii</sup> **Mark 9:50 (ESV)**

<sup>50</sup> Salt is good, but if the salt has lost its saltiness, how will you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another."

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<sup>xix</sup> **John 1:29 (ESV)**

<sup>29</sup> The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!

<sup>xx</sup> **Luke 2:35 (ESV)**

<sup>35</sup> (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed."