

As Providence would have it, our place in Acts is about to coincide with the Christmas account given by Luke. That is because it was most likely that it was after this last trip to Jerusalem with Paul that Luke gathered the information for the birth story of Jesus. Paul was in prison in Caesarea Maritima for two years, which gave Luke time in Jerusalem to interview Mary and the Apostles and the chance to read the gospels of Mark and Matthew. It must have been thrilling to sit down with Mary and some of the apostles and hear the firsthand accounts of angel visitations and miracles that doctor Luke knew were impossible without God's intervention.

Luke is unique among the gospel writers in that he connects his gospel with historical events that were taking place (Luke 2:1-2<sup>i</sup>). That may be because he was writing in Greek to a Greek, whose name was Theophilus (Luke 1:3<sup>ii</sup>). That is why he begins the birth account by telling of who was in power and the decree that sent Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem, the city of David. While they were there, Mary delivered her firstborn son. Because of the census, the city would have been packed with people from the clan of David. Distant relatives would house those who came from Nazareth, another town of David's descendants. Bethlehem was a small town where camel caravans prepared for distant journeys. It was also a town on the edge of pasture lands for sheep.

Joseph and Mary had to take the journey at a slow pace because of the late term in her pregnancy. Arriving late, they couldn't find accommodations. The area did, and does even today, have a number of limestone caves where the lambs were kept out of the weather. The oldest church in Israel today, the Church of the Nativity, was built over what is believed to be the cave where Mary gave birth to Jesus. It remains to this day because of the paintings on the upper walls of the main sanctuary. Invaders believed the depiction of the wise men were portrayed in clothing like their own so they left this one church standing. Jerome translated the Bible into Latin in an adjoining cave because he wanted to be near what he believed was the sacred site of Jesus' birth.

Imagine the setting for a moment. Mary had been told this miraculous conception was from the Holy Spirit and the child within her would be named Jesus. He would be called Son of the Most High and reign on David's throne forever (Luke 1:33-35<sup>iii</sup>). Joseph had a dream that this child was conceived by the Holy Spirit and would save people from their sins (Matthew 1:20-21<sup>iv</sup>).

A Roman census took them to Bethlehem at the time of the birth. There was nowhere but a shepherd's cave to give birth to the child in privacy. Within sight of the cave is the manmade mound that looks like a small volcano but with towers jutting out of the top. It is one of Herod the Great's amazing architectural achievements. Inside was a palace. Underneath were vast cisterns of water. In front of this enormous hill was a stadium with a rectangular lake where mock water battles took place for entertainment. Now that is a king's palace and playground! What a contrast to their little shepherd cave. But Herod the Great is dead. Historians remember him as a paranoid ruler who killed a wife

and one of his sons. All that is left now standing of his architecture is a mosque in Hebron that covers the cave where Abraham and Sarah were buried (Genesis 35:10<sup>v</sup>).

Jesus, on the other hand, is worshiped around the world. What is written about Him could fill a library. More songs are written to Him than one can learn in a lifetime. We've all but forgotten Herod the Great. In fact, what most people know about him comes from the Bible, and it is not flattering. He is the one that sent the soldiers to kill the baby boys in Bethlehem (Matthew 2:16<sup>vi</sup>).

Isn't it amazing how God uses the weak and seemingly insignificant ones to advance His kingdom! One little baby born in a shepherd's cave who never wrote a book or led an army turned out to be more influential than Herod the Great, or any ruler for that matter. With what perspective do we see the world around us? Are we looking on what lasts or what is passing? Do we tend to look at the political world and rulers and think that the future depends on them? Ha! If we do, we are ignoring what is really happening in the eternal realm. What God was doing in that stinky little cave would shake the world forever, provide forgiveness for mankind, and demonstrate the greatness of God's love! All history was hinging on what was happening there.

How easy it is for us to get caught up in the latest little political skirmishes, or even less significant, the little misunderstandings or gossip that comes to our ears. We can lose a night's sleep over things we won't even be able to recall in a month. How we need our hearts to focus on what matters, the eternal realm! **How we need our focus to be on letting Christ live in and through us to meet the real needs around us (Philippians 2:13<sup>vii</sup>), the need in the hearts of others.**

As I write this I'm being tested on this very thing. The contractor who was supposed to have finished up long before Christmas a year ago was still not done. I received a text saying they'd be finished that week. Then, while working on this part of the message, the person doing the work told me he doesn't have the equipment personnel to finish. How worked up should I get? What did I just write? Do these little things matter in the light of eternity? They matter, but on a scale of one to ten they don't rate even a one. Can we focus on what is eternal? By the grace of God, we *can* see from heaven's perspective and save ourselves a lot of stress. We need to have the mind of Christ and it is ours through the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:16<sup>viii</sup>). We just need to deliberately choose to die to the flesh and look to the Spirit. God gives His redeemed the ability to make that choice, though we may have to make it again and again (Romans 6:6<sup>ix</sup>). By the way, right after I wrote this paragraph, I got a text that said they would finish up with most everything else the following week. There really was no need to be anxious.

The baby in the manger was infinitely more important than Herod. It sure didn't look like it at the time, but angels knew it. *<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. There is a prophecy in Micah that may give us a hint as to who they were. It is not the one we normally think of related to Bethlehem, the one the scribes spoke of as the birth place of the Messiah (Micah 5:2<sup>x</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>xi</sup>). This tower of the flock is called Migdal Eder and was near the place of Rachel's burial (Genesis 35:19-21<sup>xii</sup>). The Mishna tells us that the shepherds near this tower were priests who watched for unblemished lambs to be used in the daily sacrifices and those for the sacrifices during the Feast Days<sup>xiii</sup>. Jewish tradition also confirms that this would be the place from which the Messiah would come.

The angel's announcement would have profound significance for them and for us. <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 always have to tell their audience to not fear. They are such awesome creatures that the sight of one causes the strongest warrior to tremble. 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>xiv</sup>).

This goes along with what I was saying earlier. 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>xv</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>xvi</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 your 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 will take your sins and give you His righteousness (1 Corinthians 5:21<sup>xvii</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 so looking forward to 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. The first coming makes the second wonderful. How we need to let Christ live through us right now (Colossians 1:27<sup>xviii</sup>)!

*<sup>12</sup> 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 clothes<sup>xix</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 looked for sacrificial lambs. Their announcement to others was said to cause wonder. That would more likely if they were the priestly shepherds.

*<sup>13</sup> And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, <sup>14</sup> "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"* Luke 2:13-14 Wow. Imagine that angel suddenly surrounded with a multitude of angels lighting up the sky and saying together *<sup>14</sup> "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"*. Glory to God! That is what it is all about. That is the culmination of all things. 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>xx</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>xxi</sup>). It is to not be anxious about anything (Philippians 4:6<sup>xxii</sup>). That is really what I have been speaking of regarding seeing our daily life 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. That is peace between believers. 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>xxiii</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. 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>xxiv</sup>). If we are at peace with God we should 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."*<sup>16</sup> *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 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 Eder from the mention of swaddling clothes. It was not unusual in that time to wrap newborns in salted cloths to disinfect and comfort them. Wrapping babies up like little burritos is making a comeback as we have rediscovered how it comforts them. The manger would not have been a wooden feed trough but more likely a hewn-out area in the stone wall of the cave where the feed for lambs was placed.

*17 And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child.* Luke 2:17 They made known that the angels told them that the baby was the Savior, the Messiah/Christ, the Lord. That was an earth shattering saying. That is why *18 And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.* Luke 2:18 Again, it is likely they were priestly shepherds whose announcement would be more likely to be received. Is this why John the Baptist referred to Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world (John 1:29<sup>xxv</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>xxvi</sup>). In other words, there were painful things to come, in spite of the fact that Simeon declared Jesus to be *32 "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.* Acts 2:20 And now it has been told to you. If we believe the angels' words, we 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!

#### Questions

- 1 What is the connection with our place in Acts?
- 2 What were Mary and Joseph told about the pregnancy?
- 3 Where did Micah say the Messiah would come from?
- 4 Who might these shepherds have been? Why?
- 5 What did the angels proclaim?
- 6 Why might these shepherds have been believed?
- 7 What did the angels proclaim together?
- 8 How is God glorified? 9 Where should the world see peace?
- 10 Why did people wonder at the saying?

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**<sup>i</sup> Luke 2:1-2 (ESV)**

<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.

**<sup>ii</sup> Luke 1:3 (ESV)**

<sup>3</sup> it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus,

**<sup>iii</sup> Luke 1:31-33 (ESV)**

<sup>31</sup> And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.

<sup>32</sup> He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David,

<sup>33</sup> and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

**<sup>iv</sup> Matthew 1:20-21 (ESV)**

<sup>20</sup> But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

<sup>21</sup> She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

**<sup>v</sup> Genesis 25:10 (ESV)**

<sup>10</sup> the field that Abraham purchased from the Hittites. There Abraham was buried, with Sarah his wife.

**<sup>vi</sup> Matthew 2:16 (ESV)**

<sup>16</sup> Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men.

**<sup>vii</sup> Philippians 2:13 (ESV)**

<sup>13</sup> for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

**<sup>viii</sup> 1 Corinthians 2:16 (ESV)**

<sup>16</sup> “For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?” But we have the mind of Christ.

**<sup>ix</sup> Romans 6:6 (ESV)**

<sup>6</sup> We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin.

**<sup>x</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>xi</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>xii</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>xiii</sup> Shek. vii. 4

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>xxi</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>xxii</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>xxiii</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>xxiv</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.”

<sup>xxv</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>xxvi</sup> <sup>35</sup> (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.” Luke 2:35 (ESV)