

CHRISTMAS: A SEASON OF SALVATION

SERIES: JESUS, SAVIOR OF THE LOST

By Ron Ritchie

Christmas has different meanings for each one of us, but family gatherings, good food, friends, travel, shopping, ball games, exchanging of gifts and religious celebration still seem to be part of almost everyone's Christmas celebrations.

Last week, a woman who fellowships here told me a wonderful story which I believe gives the clearest definition of the true meaning of Christmas. Kay works at a local bank, and as she was waiting on a customer he handed her a religious tract that had the plan of salvation and what we have come to know as the four spiritual laws. She thanked the man and shared that she was a Christian. He encouraged her to keep the tract and give it to someone who might want to read it. Kay immediately thought of a co-worker friend, but just then another co-worker named Esther picked up the tract and began to read it. At the end of the paper was printed an invitation to the reader to pray and invite Jesus into their heart. Esther asked Kay if she could pray right then and there. They did so, and Esther was born again. She was saved from the power of Satan, saved from the bondage to sin, and moved by her new Lord from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light and life.

The true meaning of Christmas, of course, is that it is a season of salvation.

Here is how the apostle Paul puts it in the book of Galatians: "But when the fulness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of woman, born under the Law, in order that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons" (Gal.4:4,5). In order to have a season of salvation, the world needs a Savior.

In our studies in Luke's gospel we have now reached the point which Paul describes as the "fulness of time": God sent forth his Son. In obedience to the Roman decree, Joseph and his nine-month pregnant wife Mary travel to Bethlehem in order to be counted in the census.

I. The Savior is born in Bethlehem, Luke 2:1-7

Now it came about in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth.. This was the first census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all were proceeding to register for the census, everyone to his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David, in order to register, along with Mary, who was engaged to him, and was with child. And it came about that while they were there, the days were completed for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her first-born son; and she wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

During the final weeks of Mary's pregnancy, the Jews of Nazareth received word from the local Roman garrison that Caesar Augustus had sent out a decree that a census should be taken of his empire. The Romans held a census every 14 years for the purposes of discovering how much tax money they could expect to raise, and also to identify young men for compulsory military service (although Jewish youth were exempted). Mary and Joseph both originated from the the house and family of David so they had to travel some 90 miles south of Nazareth to Bethlehem, the land of Ruth and Boaz, and the ancient home of their great-great-grandfather King David.

Ever since the fall of Adam and Eve, the Lord God was arranging this wonderful moment (Gen.3:15). God had predicted the birth of his Messiah, a son who would come out of the loins of Adam; from the loins of

Shem, one of Noah's three sons; out of Abraham through Isaac (not Ishmael); out of Jacob (not Esau); out of Jesse's son David (not one of David's seven older brothers); out of Solomon (from all of David's sons). Eventually, this son would be born of a virgin (Is.7:14) in the city of Bethlehem. As the prophet Micah had written some 700 years earlier to the capital city of Samaria and Jerusalem when they faced the forthcoming Assyrian captivity:

"But as for you, Bethlehem Ephratah,
Too little to among the clans of Judah,
From you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel.
His goings forth are from long ago,
From the days of eternity.

Therefore, He will give them up until the time
When she who is in labor has borne a child.
Then the remainder of His brethren
Will return to the sons of Israel.
And He will rise and shepherd His flock.

In the strength of the Lord,
In the majesty of the name of the Lord His God.
And they will remain,
Because at that time He will be great
To the ends of the earth.
And this One will be our Peace" (Micah 5:2-5)

God used the Roman government to help fulfill the last of many prophecies concerning the coming of Messiah, God in the flesh.

Joseph and Mary did not have any relatives with whom they could stay in Bethlehem. And, to make matters worse, all of the rooms that normally were available to travelers had already been taken up by the many Roman officials and Jews who had arrived before them. But Mary was about to give birth. Joseph found a large cave cut out of a rock ledge which was used by a local inn for housing the animals of its clients. He secured a warm place with some new straw, "And she gave birth to her first-born son; and she wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room in the inn..." the apostle John would write years later. "And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). There in that cave, a shelter for animals, was born the Son of God, the Savior of the World, the Mighty God, the Eternal Father, the Prince of Peace, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, Immanuel.

Paul reminds us in his letter to the Corinthians, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that through He was rich, yet for you sake He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich" (11 Cor. 8:9). Some 30 years later, five miles away in the city of Jerusalem, this same Son would be taken down from the cross and placed into another cave, this time a borrowed tomb (24:53).

In his book *Psalms of My Life*, Joe Bayly wrote the following poem:

Praise God for Christmas.
Praise Him for the incarnation for Word made Flesh.
I will not sing of shepherds watching flocks on frosty night or angel choristers.
I will not sing of stable bare in Bethlehem,
or lowing oxen, wise men, trailing distant star,
with gold and frankincense and myrrh.

Tonight I will sing praise to the Father who stood on heaven's threshold
And said farewell to His Son,
as He stepped across the stars to Bethlehem and Jerusalem.
And I will sing praise to the infinite eternal Son

Who became most finite a Baby,
Who would one day be executed for my crimes.
Praise Him in the heavens,
Praise Him in the stable,
Praise Him in my heart.

Christmas is a season of salvation. We should rejoice that Jesus was born in the ancient city of Bethlehem long ago, and our hearts should be filled with joy because that Child was and is the Savior Christ the Lord.

II. A Savior who is Christ the Lord, 1:8-20

And in the same region there were some shepherds staying out in the fields, and keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were terribly frightened. And the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which shall be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths, and lying in a manger."

And suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying,

"Glory to God in the highest,
And on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased."

And it came about that when the angels had gone away from them into heaven, that the shepherds began saying to one another, "Let us go straight to Bethlehem then, and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has made known to us." And they came in haste and found their way to Mary and Joseph, and the baby as He lay in the manger. And when they had seen this, they made known the statement which had been told them about this Child. And all who heard it wondered at the things which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds went back, glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen, just as had been told them.

Shortly after the birth of the Savior of the world, an angel appeared and stood before a group of shepherds in the hills of Bethlehem to announce the birth of the "Shepherd of Israel" (Gen.48:15). Scripture in many places refers to Jesus as a shepherd. For instance, in Psalm 23 he is called the faithful shepherd; in Isaiah 40:11, the tender shepherd; in Ezekiel 34, the caring shepherd; in John 10, the good shepherd; in 1 Peter 5, the chief shepherd.

Shepherds were despised by the orthodox Jews of the day because they could not keep up the requirements of the ceremonial laws, the feasts, the washing of hands, etc. Thus, shepherds were very much part of the lost sheep of their day. But the angel's announcing to shepherds the birth of the Shepherd of Israel was designed to give hope to these men, "For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost" (19:10). Not only had Jesus been born to seek and save these lost shepherds but also, as Luke details in chapter 4, quoting Jesus' words from Isaiah 61,

The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me
Because He anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor.
He has sent Me to proclaim release to the captives
And recovery of sight to the blind,
To set free those who are downtrodden
To proclaim the favorable year of the Lord.

This ministry, which began with these shepherds in Bethlehem, continued on, as it continued on to spiritually affect you and me.

The weather was mild at this time so the shepherds of the region kept watch over their flocks in the hills rather than drive them to the shelter of pens. There is some evidence that these flocks were being raised to use in the sacrifices at the temple in Jerusalem five miles away. There, an unblemished lamb was slain every morning and evening as an offering to the Lord. Now the angel was about to inform the shepherds that the Lamb of God who would take away their sins by the shedding of his own blood had just been born. We could say that their job security would last another 30 years, before the final Lamb would be slain.

The angel's first word to the frightened shepherds was, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which shall be for all the people." He was declaring good news to a society suffering from insecurity, meaninglessness, and the futility of life in general. And this good news was for all the people, Jew, Samaritan, Roman, Greek and Barbarian, regardless of their position in life, whether they be master, slave, rich, poor, king, peasant. This was good news for all, regardless of sex, color, and class, the good news of salvation by grace through faith in an age of nothing but bad news.

And here is how the angel announced this good news: "For today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior who is Christ the Lord." The long-awaited Messiah, God's Anointed One who is the Lord God, had been born in the flesh so that man, who has rebelled through Adam against the Creator, and had no power to save himself from the bondage of Satan and the power of sin, could be born again. "And this will be a sign for you; you will find a baby wrapped in cloths, and lying in a manger," declared the angel. The Savior of the world was placed in a feeding trough for his bed. "And suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men, with whom He is pleased.'" The birth of Christ in the flesh was to the glory of God the Father, and the salvation of man.

The shepherds hurried to Bethlehem and found Joseph and Mary with the baby Jesus wrapped in cloths, laying in a manger. They told the couple and others listening all that had occurred in the field, and "all who heard it wondered at the things which were told them by the shepherds." Mary "treasured these things in her heart" as the shepherds headed back to their flocks, glorifying and praising God for all that had occurred.

The text concludes,

And when eight days were completed before His circumcision, His name was then called Jesus, the name given by the angel before He was conceived in the Womb.

Earlier, the angel Gabriel had said to Joseph, "you shall call His name Jesus, for it is He who will save His people from their sins" (1:21).

Harriet Heine wrote these lines about Christmas,

If there had been no Christmas morn,
No Christ Child in a manger born,
No shepherds watching in the night,
No angel song, no star of light
Then there would be no hope today
For this old world where sin holds sway.

No peace for souls weighed down with sin,
No deep abiding joy within,
No burdens lifted by His grace,
No strength to run life's weary race,
No sorrows eased, no tempests quelled,
No fears dispersed, no doubts dispelled.

No song of praise, no answered prayer,
No loving Lord to guide and care:

But friend, there was a Christmas morn
When Christ, the Son of God, was born.
Oh, Hallelujah, praise His name,
Hope lives today because He came!

Christmas, as we have seen in these past three weeks, is a season of mystery, a season of joyful songs, and a season of salvation. Esther became a born again Christian a few days ago while standing at a counter reading a tract about the good news of salvation. The angels rejoiced too at her spiritual birth (Luke 15:10). And in this case the angels had to stand by her to sing a second and third chorus, because Esther went home and shared the good news with her husband, and he asked Christ to become his Lord and Savior. Then the couple told the good news to their 6-year-old daughter and she prayed and asked Jesus to become her Lord and Savior.

When Esther returned to work, Kay encouraged her to share her new-found faith with the co-worker whom Kay had originally hoped to give the tract in the first place. As the shepherds who shared the good news, she too was faithful to share with her fellow-worker. We do not know what the Holy Spirit will do with the seed which has been planted in this woman's heart. Let us pray that she too might come to understand that Christmas is not just a time for family gatherings, eating and ski trips, but that it is a time for salvation by grace through faith in the One who was born that day in Bethlehem.

Christmas was and is and will always be until Christ comes again a season of salvation to every one who is willing by faith to ask Jesus to become their Lord and Savior. I don't know what Christmas means to you, but for Esther it is a season of salvation. She and her husband and daughter came to faith in the Child who is the Savior of the world, the One who grew up and died for our sins on the cross, but was raised again from the dead and now lives in our hearts. Let us pray that many here this morning who have not yet given their hearts to Jesus will do as this family did last week, and that as a result they will truly enter into the joy of this season of salvation.

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