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## Luke 2:1-24

# Bethlehem: The City of the King

I confess to being a bit of a Christmas Grinch. I love what Christmas represents along with its music, meaning, and celebration, but what I grow tired of is its commercialization. The unnecessary stress and anxiety often associated with the holiday seems to miss the point. Christmas should center on the incarnated Christ, the joy of family, the gift of salvation, and the hope of Christ's return.

Although we exchange many gifts throughout the season, nothing can surpass the gift of Christ. The well-known nativity story recorded in Luke 2 opens with a series of **Signs** (vs. 1-7). A census was forced likely for military and taxation purposes. Jews hated taxation and many refused to pay. Due to the census, Joseph and pregnant Mary arrive in Bethlehem, a city that was 85-90 miles away. It would have taken about 5-6 days for them to arrive in Bethlehem.

Due to the lack of space "in the inn" (or more likely an upper room), the young couple find themselves homeless in Joseph's hometown. Jesus is born and wrapped in "swaddling clothes." Practically, these "bandages" were often used to wash infants in salt water. The Jews believed this was good for the child. Spiritually, however, the act of wrapping the infant in these bandages recalls God's condemnation of Israel's apostasy in Ezekiel 16:3-4. There, he complained Israel were not metaphorically washed and rubbed with salt or swaddled. The Jews, then, would partake in this ceremony at birth as a way of signaling faithfulness. Failing to do so was a sign of apostasy.

From there, Luke describes the **Shepherds** (vs. 8-20). Shepherds are, surprisingly, a commonly referenced vocation in the Bible. Few mothers would have wanted their children to grow up to be shepherds. If you were to announce the birth of God, you wouldn't first go to them. They were low on the social and economic totem pole. They were poor and unable to keep the Sabbath or celebrate the Jewish feasts. In the shepherds, then, God announced the birth of his Son to the lowest of the low, the poorest of the poor, the despised of the despised, the outcast of the outcast because Christ left His throne to become all those things. One is reminded of Paul's description of the incarnation, "[He] made himself nothing" (Philippians 2:7). Regardless, Bethlehem's proximity to Jerusalem meant that these sheep were being raised for sacrifice at the Temple.

The angels appear (vs. 10-14) and announce the arrival of good news. Christ the Lord has been born in Bethlehem who has been sent from God to save all men of their sins. Christians call this the gospel. In other words: the gospel has been born this day in the City of David.

Luke finally describes the **Sacrifice** (vs. 21-24). Jewish boys were circumcised 8 days after they were born. At the circumcision, they would be given their name. Jewish women were considered unclean for 33 days after giving birth. At the end of that period, the couple would go to Jerusalem and offer

a sacrifice in the Temple. It is striking that Joseph and Mary offer a pair of doves which was the available option for the poor.

Through all of this, Luke demonstrates Jesus was born as a humble king. One of the ways Luke makes this argument is he juxtaposes Christ with Caesar. In the opening verse, we meet Ceasar Augustus who issues the census and Christ who is laid in the manger. Both are kings. One was born and remains in a palace, the other was born homeless. One saved Rome, the other will save the world. One is an earthly king, the other is the heavenly King. Christ was born among animals and placed in a feeding trough. It doesn't get any lower than this.

But Jesus is not merely a humbled king, he is the Savior. The angels, for example, announce "good news" in verse 10. The good news is that Christ is the universal Lord. Perhaps this is best seen in the passing reference to the "swaddling clothes" in verse 12. Where did Joseph and Mary get these bandages? There are two possible options, both direct us to the cross and resurrection. First, Jewish Law required the deceased to be buried immediately upon their death. When traveling, Jews would put this cloth around their waste in case they or someone they come across suddenly dies. In other words, this cloth was primarily used as a burial cloth. Secondly, it was a common practice among shepherds. Since the nearby sheep were being raised for sacrifice, they had to be "without spot or blemish." Thus, the shepherds would inspect newborn lambs and swaddle them to keep them from injuring themselves. These sorts of bandages were likely readily available in the cave.

Regardless, we are given a foreshadowing. This is no mere king with a humbled birth. This is a king with a destiny to save sinners by the means of his sacrificial death.

The final verse of "O Little Town of Bethlehem" is interesting. Philip Brooks wrote the hymn in the 19<sup>th</sup> century after traveling by horseback from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. He stated, "Before dark we rode out of town to the field where they say the shepherds saw the star. It is a fenced piece of ground with a cave in it, in which, strangely enough, they put the shepherds. ... Somewhere in those fields we rode through, the shepherds must have been. As we passed, the shepherds were still 'keeping watch over their flocks,' or leading them home to fold."

In the final verse, he connects the birth of Savior in the world to the birth of the Savior in the human heart. O holy Child of Bethlehem, / descend to us, we pray / cast out our sin and enter in / be born in us today / We hear the Christmas angels / the great glad tidings tell / O come to us, abide with us, / our Lord Immanuel!

Isn't that what Christmas is all about? Christ comes in humility to a city of sorrow, to a city of redemption, to save souls. Through him we have salvation. Through him we have joy. Through him, we have peace.