

## *God's Perfect Gift*

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on December 25, 2022.

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town. 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, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. 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. And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. 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. 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. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

"Glory to God in the highest,  
and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

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." And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger (Lk. 2:1–16).<sup>1</sup>

### **Perfect Time**

Luke locates his narrative not in the realm of myth or legend but objective time: "In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered." (2:1). Caesar Augustus was none other than the infamous and arrogant Octavian, who defeated Antony and Cleopatra to secure his throne and the first to claim the title of emperor. He also was considered, or considered himself, a deity. What he decreed was obeyed throughout the empire, which at the time was the known "world," and his decree was likely for the all-important function of levying taxes – registration for taxation. As Luke explains, registration required a return to one's ancestral home, a curious detail revealing the concurrence of the emperor's decree and the will of God. And so, Joseph of Nazareth traveled to the city of his ancestor David, not the kingdom city of Jerusalem but the little town of Bethlehem. And he went not alone but with his betrothed, Mary, a virgin miraculously great with child.

We do not know her term, but we do know they lingered long enough in Bethlehem for the birth of Mary's firstborn son, her supernatural conception resulting in a natural birth. The timing was surely inconvenient, childbirth away from home, away from the comforting support-structure of

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<sup>1</sup> Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

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family, a time of vulnerability in a place of unfamiliarity. Yet, this was the time of God's appointment, the right time, the perfect time.

Luke's introduction is not without irony: Caesar, who ruled over the Roman empire at the time of our Savior's birth, was hailed "savior of the whole world."<sup>2</sup> And he ruled the world, including Israel. The time of Jesus' birth was a low-point for the once-great nation of Israel, who was neither sovereign nor free but under Roman rule, leading to an apathetic leadership and giving way to the uprising rebellions of zealots. It was also a time of renewed interest in the coming Messiah, the Christ. And it was at this time, a humble Nazarene carpenter traveled away from home with his pregnant fiancé, who gave birth to the true Savior, not in the palatial prestige of Rome but in an obscure barn in Bethlehem. Given their circumstances, it seemed a bad time, but given God's providential plan, it was the perfect time.

There is a temptation in many of us to see God's timing as perfect when conveniently confined to the pages of Scripture but remarkably inconvenient when set at odds with our expectations. This leads to a dual profession in many Christians who profess to God, "My times are in your hand" (Ps. 31:15), and yet live as if they are in our own. We readily agree that God is sovereign over our days, and then lament the day he gives. In his brilliant book, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, Carl Trueman confronts this tendency, stating,

Lamentation [for a lost golden age or even for the parlous state of culture as we now face it] is popular in many conservative and Christian circles ... No doubt [this] has its therapeutic appeal in a therapeutic time like ours, whether as a form of Pharisaic reassurance that we are not like others ... or as a means of convincing ourselves that we have the special knowledge that allows us to stand above the petty enchantments and superficial pleasures of this present age. But in terms of positive action, lamentation offers little and delivers less. As for the notion of some lost golden age ... What past times were better than the present? An era before antibiotics when childbirth or even minor cuts might lead to septicemia and death? The great days of the nineteenth century when the church was culturally powerful and marriage was between one man and one woman for life but little children worked in factories and swept chimneys? Perhaps the Great Depression? The Second World War? The era of Vietnam? Every age has had its darkness and its dangers. The task of the Christian is not to whine about the moment in which he or she lives but to understand its problems and respond appropriately to them.<sup>3</sup>

And part of our understanding and response includes trusting God's sovereign orchestration of time. Sometimes we need a friend like Martin Luther who scolded his friend, "Cease trying to govern the world!"<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke*, Vol. 1 (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2009), 66.

<sup>3</sup> Carl R. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020), 30.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in J.C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on Luke*, Vol. 1 (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2012), 39.

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I would assume that neither Joseph nor Mary chose Bethlehem for the place of Jesus' birth, but God did. Often life does not unfold the way we planned, but whining about it helps no one, especially you. In fact, when we refuse to trust the Lord's timing, we blind ourselves to the blessing of seeing how he provides, and we rob ourselves of the trusting peace of his providence. There are many reasons to consider the timing of Jesus' birth as the worst of times, and yet as the apostle Paul puts it, Jesus was born "in the fullness of time" (Gl. 4:4), meaning precisely at the right moment in history according to God's providential direction of world events, peoples, and nations readied for the incarnation of Christ and his gospel. It was the perfect time, and so it is.

### **Perfect Place**

Jesus was born in Bethlehem, not Nazareth as the Pharisees presumed, and not Jerusalem as his royal lineage might demand, but a little town of low regard except for the prophetic Word:

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 (Mc. 5:2).

Bethlehem, the prophesied place of Christ's birth, became just that, confirming Jesus' place in the house of David, his ascension to the throne, his fulfillment of the covenant. And in that place, in space and time, a young woman gave birth. Andrew Peterson reminds of this reality when he sings,

It was not a silent night  
There was blood on the ground  
You could hear a woman cry  
In the alleyways that night  
On the streets of David's town

And the stable was not clean  
And the cobblestones were cold  
And little Mary full of grace  
With the tears upon her face  
Had no mother's hand to hold.<sup>5</sup>

A newborn son, and Son of God, was greeted with the meager means of peasantry, cloths for swaddling, and a feeding trough for a crib. But that manger in that town was the place of God's appointment, and nowhere else.

In that humble place,

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<sup>5</sup> Andrew Peterson, "Labor of Love," AZ Lyrics, accessed December 20, 2022, <https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/andrewpeterson/laboroflove.html>

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Veiled in flesh the Godhead see;  
hail th'incarnate Deity,  
pleased as man with men to dwell,  
Jesus, our Emmanuel.<sup>6</sup>

He is God with us, as we profess:

God of God, Light of Light,  
very God of very God,  
begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father;  
by whom all things were made;  
who for us and for our salvation  
came down from heaven,  
and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary,  
and was made man.<sup>7</sup>

And he who was born in Bethlehem is that same one, “who though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross”(Pp. 2:6-8).

He who was born in Bethlehem, who lived and died in humiliation, and resurrected and ascended in glory, he who even now is highly exalted, is also present in this very place! Just as Bethlehem was the perfect place of his birth, so the temple of his assembled people is the place of his perfect presence, as he promised (Mt. 18:20): “I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people,” and so he is (2 Cr. 6:16). Our Immanuel is indeed with us both now and forever, as the prophet Micah foretold,

And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD,  
in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God.  
And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great  
to the ends of the earth.  
And he shall be their peace (Mc. 5:4-5a).

Indeed, he is our peace, who promised, “I will never leave you nor forsake you” (Hb. 13:5), and “I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Mt. 28:20).

### **Perfect Provision**

From the lowly place of Jesus' birth, Luke shifts his narrative to the fields, where humble shepherds watch over their flock by night. According to tradition, these fields were used for the

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<sup>6</sup> Charles Wesley, “Hark! the Herald Angels Sing,” *Trinity Hymnal*, Revised Edition (Suwanee: Great Commission Publications, Inc., 1990), 203.

<sup>7</sup> “The Nicene Creed, *Ibid.*, 846.

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animals raised and grazed for temple sacrifices<sup>8</sup>, a fascinating tie-in with the announcement of the birth of the Lamb of God. Whether this is the case or not, the keeping of sheep is. Harking back to the book of Jeremiah, in an oft-forgotten passage, we hear a prophetic promise given to Israel, a time after their return home from captivity, a word from the Lord promising,

“In this place that is waste, without man or beast, and in all of its cities, there shall again be habitations of shepherds resting their flocks. In the cities of the hill country . . . flocks shall again pass under the hands of the one who counts them, says the LORD.

Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David, and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land” (Jr. 33:12-15).

In prophetic language uniting characteristics of Christ's first and second advent, we hear that the introduction of the heir to the throne of David begins with “shepherds resting their flocks.” In fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy, on the night of Christ's birth, there were indeed “habitations of shepherds resting their flocks,” without expectation of what awaited them.

And so, Luke recounts that at the perfect time, in the perfect place, “there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night” (2:8). They are not of noble birth or profession but are the first to receive the angelic “good news of great joy.” The Lord could have sent his angel to the civil authority, such as Caesar Augustus, or Quirinius, or King Herod, or to the religious authority, such as the chief priest Caiaphas or the assembly of the Sanhedrin, but instead he sent his angel to unknown shepherds of no regard, like you and me, to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ. As the virgin Mary prayed in her Magnificat, “[The Lord] has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate” (Lk. 1:52), so the lowly shepherds were exalted in hearing the good news of great joy! In receiving this good news, Paul reminds us,

God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption (Pp. 2:10-12).

While we sing, “The first Noel the angels did say was to certain poor shepherds in fields as they lay,” the tranquility of the carol surely is not in keeping with the startling, sudden appearance of the supernatural. Into the ordinary rhythm of the shepherd's dark night, an explosion of light captivated their attention, and “the glory of the Lord shone around them.” So startling was the “glory of the Lord,” when it was revealed at Solomon's dedication of the temple, all the people fell down with their faces to the ground, prostrate in worship (2 Chron. 7:3). So, here is the understatement of understatements: The shepherds “were filled with great fear”! But the gospel

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<sup>8</sup> Sinclair B. Ferguson, *Child in the Manger: The True Meaning of Christmas* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2015), 143.

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is never given to leave us wallowing in fear nor cowering in terror but believing the “good news of great joy” and responding in joyful obedience. And so, the angel says to the terrified shepherds, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.”

One of the curious characteristics of the angel's announcement to the shepherds on the night of Jesus' birth is the sudden appearance of “a multitude of the heavenly host praising God” (Lk. 2:13). From the shepherds' perspective, surely the appearance of one angel was enough. Surely the “good news of great joy” (Lk. 2:10) was good enough. But as soon as the angel announced, “For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord,” as soon as the angel said, “you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger,” the sky was filled with “a multitude of the heavenly host” (Lk. 2:11-13), a sudden explosion of angelic presence and praise. It was as if they were waiting with anticipation for the announcement, awaiting the moment to appear and praise, not to show up merely to be seen but to sing:

Glory to God in the highest,  
and on earth peace among those with  
whom he is pleased! (Lk. 2:14).

The apostle Peter says that this good news of great joy to the shepherds and onward to us was the mission of the prophets and of primary interest to the angels (1 Pt. 1:12), but both were required to wait for “the fullness of time” (Gl. 4:4). In delivering this pastoral proclamation and praise, the angels appeared in that moment not as omniscient celestial beings but as worshipers awaiting God's redemptive revelation. And as Christ was incarnate, living, dying, and resurrecting, the revelation of the good news became richer and fuller until finally “the manifold wisdom of God” was revealed in Christ's church, and witnessed not only by us but “the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places” (Ep. 3:10).

We often think of the sudden, supernatural appearance of the heavenly host in relation to Jesus' birth, and rightly so. But in a sense, their explosion of praise is but a commencement of our continued celebration. For, we are not waiting like the Old Testament saints or even the angels, but “in these last days [God] has spoken to us by his Son” (Hb. 1:2) and has revealed his redemptive purposes in his church. So, let the angelic chorus continue, “Glory to God in the highest!”