



Sunday School Lesson Summary for December 23, 2007
Released on December 19, 2007

"Called to Rejoice"

Printed Text: Luke 2:1-14

Background Scripture: Luke 2:1-20

Devotional Reading: Psalm 96:1-6

Luke 2:1-14

1 And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Cae'sar Au-gus'tus, that all the world should be taxed.

2 (And this taxing was first made when Cy-re'ni-us was governor of Syr'i-a.)

3 And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city.

4 And Jo'seph also went up from Gal'i-tee, out of the city of Naz'a-reth, into Ju-dae'a, unto the city of Da'vid, which is called Beth'le-hem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:)

5 To be taxed with Ma'ry his espoused wife, being great with child.

6 And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered.

7 And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.

8 And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.

9 And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.

10 And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.

11 For unto you is born this day in the city of Da'vid a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.

12 And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.

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, good will toward men.

INTRODUCTION

Rejoicing in the fallen world can sometimes seem difficult to do. In spite of Paul's exhortation to "rejoice evermore" (1 Thessalonians 5:16), we are troubled because we know things are not as they should be. Natural calamities continue to exact their toll. World peace eludes politicians as national, ethnic, and religious rivalries threaten to erupt into violence. Much of humanity lives in poverty or under oppression. We are saddened to see death stalking city streets and corruption defiling political offices. We grieve that false faiths are leading gullible souls astray while precious biblical truths are maligned.

Even the atmosphere surrounding Christmas brings distress. We find ourselves sucked into a whirlwind of commercial madness, battling crowds and scrambling to mail our gifts on time. In spite of our best intentions, Jesus is crowded out by sheer busyness. How can we rejoice? Let us hear the angel's message anew and rejoice with the shepherds.

Today's Aim

Facts: to focus on the arrival of Joseph and Mary in Bethlehem, the birth of Jesus, and the adoration of local shepherds.

Principle: to show that the incarnation of the Son of God had both humble human and exalted divine elements.

Application: to convince people that Jesus "came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45).

Royal Decree (Luke 2:1-3)

1. What did the decree from Augustus require his subjects to do? (v. 1)

Caesar Augustus, also known as Octavius, founded the Roman Empire and was the grandnephew and adopted son of Julius Caesar. Having defeated Mark Antony, his rival, he reorganized the government and ushered in an unprecedented period of peace (the Pax Romana).

In this week's lesson, he is seen issuing a decree "that all the world should be taxed" (Luke 2:1). "The world", of course, was not the entire earth but the Roman Empire. The word translated "taxed" means the people enrolled or registered for purposes of taxation. This was the method used to number each nation by family and tribe. We, today, know this method as a "census". A census is defined as an official count of population and recording of economic status, age, sex, etc...

2. Why did Joseph have to travel to Bethlehem? (v. 3)

According to the decree, the people had to be taxed in their own city (the city from whence they originated from/the home city of their ancestors – to be registered). This was not the usual Roman practice, which had persons register at their place of residence. But registering in one's ancestral city was not unknown to the Romans, and they may have allowed it here to keep peace with the Jews. The Romans had learned that it was wise not to antagonize their subjects.

Since Joseph originated from Bethlehem, he and his espoused wife, Mary returned there for taxation. However, we know these decisions, made at the highest levels of government, were ultimately directed by an even higher authority.

Humble Birth (Luke 2:4–7)

3. From God's point of view, why was it important that Joseph and Mary go to Bethlehem? (vs. 4-5)

Although, the decision to be taxed was made under the authority of Caesar Augustus, it was orchestrated at an even higher power; the power of God. God used this census (taxation) to get Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem and there fulfill His prophecy regarding the place of the Messiah's birth foretold by the Prophet Micah. (Micah 5:2) – "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, Though you are little among the thousands of Judah, Yet out of you shall come forth to Me, the One to be Ruler in Israel, Whose goings forth are from of old, From everlasting."

In obedience to the decree, Joseph left his residence in Nazareth and, with Mary, headed for Bethlehem. The journey was eighty to ninety miles long. Luke emphasized the connection between Joseph and the line of David. Joseph was registered in David's city because he was of that lineage.

To refer to Bethlehem as "the city of David" (Luke 2:4) is unusual, for in the Old Testament this term always spoke of Jerusalem, or the original fort of Zion there (cf. II Sam. 5:7, 9; I Kings 8:1). Nevertheless, Bethlehem was David's original home (1 Sam. 16:1; 17:12); so it deserved to be recognized as the appropriate place for his descendants to register. It was also the right place for the Messiah, the Son of David, to be born.

As mentioned earlier, Mary accompanied Joseph along this journey however, it is not clear why. Perhaps she was required to go because she too was a descendant of David. It is more likely it was for personal reasons, for she was expecting a child. Knowing that the time of her delivery was near, Joseph would not have wanted her to give birth in Nazareth in his absence. Furthermore, they both may have remembered that since this child was the Messiah, He was to be born in Bethlehem in fulfillment of prophecy (Mic. 5:2).

4. Without overspiritualizing things, when have you noticed God working through the "mundane" events in life? How can we get better at noticing His work around us?

Taxes, travel, accommodation hassles. As God's amazing intervention into history unfolds, the miraculous is hidden within the mundane. Elizabeth Barrett Browning had the right idea when she wrote,

Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;
And only he who sees takes off his shoes;
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.

What was true in Browning's day (over 100 years ago) is no less true today: alert eyes are needed to acknowledge God's work around us. The first step in doing this is to pause and actually *look* (see Psalm 19).

5. Why was it important that Jesus be called Mary's firstborn son? (vs. 6-7)

While still in Bethlehem, the time had arrived for the birth of the Messiah. Luke does not give any indication of how long the couple had been in Bethlehem when this occurred – it merely states that “while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered.” Luke referred to Jesus as Mary's “firstborn son” (Luke 2:7; cf. v. 23). It was important to establish that He enjoyed all the rights of the firstborn in the family, including the royal rights in the Davidic line. It may also hint at the fact that Mary would later have other children (cf. 8:19-20).

6. What paradox exists between the city of Jesus' birth and the immediate circumstances of it? (vs. 7)

In verse 7, we are given the circumstances surrounding Jesus' birth. After Jesus was born, Mary wrapped Him in “swaddling clothes”, strips of cloth wrapped around the child to keep the limbs straight. She also “laid him in a manger,” a feeding trough for animals. These would later be the signs given to the shepherds for identifying the Messiah (v. 12).

Since Mary is said to have done these things, we get the impression that she had no assistance in her hour of need. Although no stable is mentioned in the text, the presence of a manger suggests that Jesus was born in a place that housed animals. This is reinforced by the comment that this occurred because there was no room for them in the inn. Our modern stereotype of an inn with an innkeeper may be inaccurate, since the word used is not the usual one for an inn. It refers, rather, to any lodging place, be it a guest room in a house or a public shelter. (It is translated “guest chamber” in Luke 22:1). In any case, no lodging place was available, and Jesus was born among the animals.

Even with Luke's unadorned narrative, which merely records the facts, we cannot miss a great paradox. Though the Messiah was born in the royal city, His surroundings were anything but regal. We are impressed with His humility in coming into such circumstances.

7. Jesus set aside great power and majesty to become human. What are some ways we can set aside our own personal power or influence? Under what circumstances should we do so?

We may be tempted to say that we have no power to give up. But all of us have some level of influence. We exercise that influence, in bad or good ways, through whatever power of persuasion, money, talent, or position we have.

Sometimes we use our power to “make sure” that we get the credit that we think is due to us, to get our own way, or to put someone in his or her place. All these circumstances are prime candidates for deciding *not* to do what we have the power to do! Jesus modeled humility for us.

On the other hand, it is wrong to have a talent or spiritual gift and pretend not to have it. That's false humility, used sometimes to avoid certain areas of Christian service.

Angelic Announcement (Luke 2:8–12)

8. Why is it significant that shepherds were the first to hear of Jesus' birth? (vs. 8-9)

The scene now to the nearby fields, where shepherds were "keeping watch over their flock by night." But although the scene has changed, the circumstances have not, for shepherds were among the humble and lowly of Jewish society. It was again to ordinary people that God brought His message of salvation (cf. 1:5, 26).

Although common people are not automatically godly, their lives are often less cumbered with things that could be obstacles to faith (cf. Matt. 19:16-26; Jas. 2:1-7; 5:1-6). While they are often despised by the wealthy and learned, common folk tend to be more receptive to God's revelation when they encounter it.

As these shepherds were engaged in their nightly routine, an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and "the glory of the Lord shone round about them" (Luke 2:9). This is the glory of God's presence (the Shekinah) variously manifested in the Old Testament.

It had appeared to Moses in the burning bush, to Israel in the pillar of fire, and to the worshipers in the tabernacle and temple. This glory had not been seen since it departed from the temple in Ezekiel's day. Now, after several centuries, it reappeared, this time to humble shepherds!

The combination of the angel and the divine glory terrified the shepherds. Their fear was like that of Zacharias when he saw Gabriel (Luke 1:12) and of the three disciples at Jesus' transfiguration (9:34). This was a normal human reaction to a display of divine glory.

9. Why was Jesus called Saviour, Christ, and Lord? (v. 11)

The angel began his announcement by calming the shepherds' fear (v. 10). The fear was understandable, but it had to be overcome if they were to understand and appreciate God's good news. This angel has a wonderful message indeed. First, the angel quickly offers the shepherds reassuring words: *Fear not*. Then comes the threefold message: *good tidings ... great joy ... all people*. The birth of this child is indeed "good news," the beginning of the gospel. He will bring the world the joy of salvation. Note that this salvation will be available not just to those of Israel, but to everyone.

The combination of the titles "Saviour," "Christ," and "Lord" is found in few places in the New Testament. As Saviour, Jesus came as the Deliverer of His people, both physically and spiritually (Luke 1:69-77; cf. Matt. 1:21). He was fully capable of doing this because He was the Christ, or Messiah, and also the divine Lord. It is noteworthy that the word Luke used for "Lord" is used in the Greek Old Testament about 6,150 times to translate "Yahweh" (Bock).

10. How would the shepherds know they had found the Messiah? (v. 12)

In verse 12, Luke had written, there would be a sign given unto them (the shepherds) and the sign would be they would find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. In light of the heavenly fanfare, one might expect to find Him in a palace. But the feeding trough, with its rustic surroundings, would better fit His mission to mankind. He would identify with the lowly (1:50-53). No one was beneath the reach of His grace.

Divine Praise (Luke 2:13, 14)

11. What did the angels proclaim for heaven and earth? (vs. 13-14)

During vs. 13-14, the angels were accompanied by a multitude of heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men. The angels praised God for the unique accomplishment of His power and grace. They ascribed glory to God in the highest. "Highest" can mean "to the highest degree" or "in the highest place." The second is more likely, since it is parallel to peace on earth. Thus, the angels saw God receiving the highest praise from the heavenly hosts themselves.

While heaven rang with God's praise, there was "on earth peace" (Luke 2:14). The Messiah would make possible a harmonious bond between God and man. "Good will toward men" could also be translated "to those on whom His favor rests" or "to those of His good pleasure." This is a designation of who will receive His peace. The peace Jesus provides brings benefits only to those who receive Him by faith.

CONCLUSION

A. With Him on Earth

With their words ringing in the ears of the shepherds, the angels departed and returned to Heaven. No heavenly messenger had ever proclaimed such a glad message. To the world had been born a Savior, Christ the Lord. We should join the humble shepherds in their excitement and amazement. This is a message that calls everyone to rejoice.

The message of the birth in Bethlehem is far more than the mere sweetness of a baby. The real message of Christmas is the coming of the Son of God to live (and give] His life as the Son of Man. "The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us" (John 1:14]. This is the miracle of the incarnation.

Jesus came to have an intimate participation in our world. He came as a baby, helplessly swaddled in tight strips of cloth. He came as a human to face hunger and thirst, temptation and persecution. He wept real tears; He bled real blood; He died a real death on the cross; He gained a real resurrection.

In all this, "he became the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him" (Hebrews 5:9). He "was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin" (Hebrews 4:15). Jesus knew what it was to be a man. He came to earth to be Immanuel—"God with us" (Matthew 1:23).

B. With Him in Heaven

Jesus came to live with us on earth so that one day we can live with God in Heaven. His encounter with humanity makes possible our encounter with God in the future. Revelation 21:3 foretells the day when, "He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God."

Because of the messages of Christmas and Easter, we can look forward to the day when we shall join the angel's praise: "Glory to God in the highest." Christmas calls us to rejoice in the coming of our Savior. Christmas calls us to rejoice in the gift of God's grace.

PRAYER

Father, we praise You for sending Your Son to bring us salvation. May our hearts rejoice as we hear again the good news. As Jesus came to dwell among us, we long for the day when we shall dwell with You. In Jesus' name, amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

The gospel is still good news of great joy for all people.

ANTICIPATING THE NEXT LESSON

Study **Luke 2:22-35** "**Called to Witness**" in anticipation of next week's lesson.

LESSON SUMMARIZED BY

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