

THE DAWN OF REDEEMING GRACE

Luke 2:1-20

The birth of Christ has meant more to the world than that of any other person. Seven hundred years before the Saviour was born, the prophet Micah had foretold that He would be born in Bethlehem.

When the time arrived for the birth of Christ to take place, as promised by the Heavenly Father and as foretold by the prophets, Caesar Augustus was on the imperial throne in Rome. Wanting and needing more money, he issued a decree that all of the world over which he had control should be enrolled with a view to taxation and perhaps military service. On the basis of this census new taxes were to be levied.

Instead of waiting for the census enumerator to call on each citizen, it was decreed that every man would have to go to the village or city where he was born and be enrolled. Joseph and Mary resided at Nazareth, but their enrolment required them to journey to Bethlehem, which was nearly one hundred miles away by the route which they traveled. In those days when a person traveled by land he rode a donkey or a camel, or he walked. Being a poor man, it is assumed that Joseph walked and that Mary, who was soon to give birth to her first child, rode on a donkey.

For both of them it was a long and tiresome journey. For Mary it was an unusually difficult trip. According to custom Mary's face was veiled as she rode over the winding, uneven trail that connected the little village of Nazareth with the outside world. It is doubtful if there was a single complaint as to her way of life and method of travel as she rode on with her head bowed hoping to reach Bethlehem before her deliverance.

Late one afternoon, as the sun was dropping into the Mediterranean Sea, Joseph and Mary arrived at the only inn which Bethlehem could claim as its own. Like the average small-town hotel today, the inn was seldom filled with guests. With so many having to return to Bethlehem to be enrolled at this particular time, the inn was filled to capacity. It was urgent that Mary have a place to rest and to prepare for the birth of her child. No time could be lost. When not even an improvised corner could be found in the inn to shelter and protect the expectant mother, Joseph was almost frantic. Finally, the innkeeper told Joseph that he and Mary might stay in the stable if they desired to do so. As a last resort, Joseph and Mary entered the stable. There she gave birth to the Lord Jesus Christ. He was cradled in a manger "because there was no room for him in the inn." What foreboding in those words! Lack of hospitality was the experience of our Lord through His earthly ministry.

What a contrast between the stable and the inn! One was for the animals and the other was for people. One was cheerless and comfortless, and the other had the common comforts and conveniences which would minister to the needs of people. One was the place where the Son of God could find shelter, and the other was so crowded that there was no room for Him. The stable has passed into history dignified and glorified by the distinction of being the birthplace of the Lord Jesus, while the inn is without a place of honor on history's pages, but stands as a monument of missed opportunity. The opportunity of sheltering the Christ came to the inn but once. When it was lost, it was gone forever.

At that time there were lowly shepherds in the Judean hills watching over their flocks. While these humble shepherds were guarding their sheep and protecting them from robbers and wild beasts, they were visited by an angel of the Lord. As the glory of the Lord shone round about this heavenly messenger the shepherds were frightened. Most anyone would have been under the circumstances. Seeking to calm the shepherds, the angel said,

"Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord." The angel not only told the city in which Jesus Christ was born, but he gave to them a sign by which they might recognize Him -- "Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger."

These shepherds were stirred profoundly when they heard the sweetest carol ever sung and the most wondrous message ever spoken. They were the only ones who heard the angels sing that night, but today the people of various nations sing,

"Hark! the herald angels sing,
'Glory to the new-born king;
Peace on earth, and mercy mild;
God and sinners reconciled.'"

When the visitor from heaven departed "the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us." When they arrived in the little town, they found a lowly Babe lying in a manger, surrounded with the common things that were usually kept in barns. Those shepherds not only found Christ in Bethlehem, but hope and joy also. When they returned from their trip they were "glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen." They rejoiced because they had seen the Son of God Who was to bring so many and such wonderful blessings to the people of this world.

Having availed themselves of the glorious opportunity of gazing upon the Saviour in person the shepherds promptly set themselves to the great and challenging task of proclaiming to others who were less fortunate than they the good news about what they had seen and heard. In this respect they set for us a splendid example. Since all need to hear the good news which is contained in the glorious gospel of Christ, it is obligatory that every Christian tell others what Christ has done for him and for others. If people are to be saved, they must be told about the Christ Who alone can save them. Let us not only give Him His rightful place in our hearts and lives, but also be faithful in witnessing for Him.