

THE BIRTH OF THE SAVIOUR

Matthew 1, Luke 2

Gabriel the archangel announced the birth of Jesus Christ to His virgin-mother in these words: "Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favor with God. And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb and shall bring forth a son, and shalt call His name Jesus" (Luke 1:30-31).

When "Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost" (Matthew 1:18). To Joseph the angel of the Lord appeared and said: "Fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost. And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name Jesus: for He shall save His people from their sins" (Matthew 1:20-21).

Joseph and Mary were engaged, but not married. Among the Jews in that day an engagement was not a light thing which might be broken off casually upon some slight pretext. The tie of betrothal was as sacred as that of marriage, and infidelities before marriage were considered as sinful as those following marriage, and death by stoning was the punishment for such sins. It was customary for a couple to be engaged for twelve months before marriage. For Joseph and Mary, this period, during which they were looking forward to their coming nuptials, was a time gilded by many bright hopes of future happiness.

It was a terrible shock to Joseph when he was informed that Mary was to become a mother. His trial was most painful because he did not know what the written gospel later plainly asserted; namely, that the Holy Ghost was responsible for her condition. Joseph did not know the details of Mary's conduct, but he naturally thought that she had been unfaithful to him. His suspicions were natural and excusable, but how cruelly they must have wounded the tender heart of Mary. Regardless of what he thought, Mary was conscious of her innocence, and the angel had announced to her the reason for her conception.

Joseph did not know what to do. Being a just, merciful, and religious man, he wanted to do what was right. The law permitted him to make a public example of her and have her stoned, but his genuine love for Mary constrained him to do otherwise. Although what he had been told made a great demand on Joseph's faith, our hearts are really touched by his tenderness and considerateness. We admire him for his determination to do what was right, and to do it in a kind manner.

While Joseph thought seriously and prayerfully about what he should do, an angel appeared unto him in a dream and delivered a message from the Lord as to what he should do. This message removed his doubts, calmed his fears, and caused him to rejoice again in the love of his betrothed. When the angel proclaimed the fact that "that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost," Joseph was convinced and his heart was filled with gratitude for the revelation. This message assured him that Mary had not transgressed; therefore, his reputation could not be impaired by their marriage.

Concerning the yet unborn Child, Joseph was informed as to His birth, His name, and His mission. He was coming to root out and to destroy the diseases of the souls of men and to give them perfect spiritual health. God's son was coming for the purpose of bringing eternal life to all who would receive Him as a personal Saviour.

In obedience to the command of the angel, Joseph was united in marriage with Mary, most likely in a private wedding, due to the circumstances.

Just before the birth of the Lord Jesus, Joseph and Mary were in Nazareth, some sixty miles north of Bethlehem. In order that they might be in the proper place at the right time, God caused Caesar Augustus to issue a decree that all the world over which he had control should be enrolled, everyone in his own city, with a view to taxation and perhaps military service. In response to this decree Joseph and Mary made their way to Bethlehem. 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 so desired. As a last resort they entered the stable, and there Mary gave birth to the Lord Jesus "because there was no room for them in the inn."

What foreboding in those words! Lack of hospitality was the experience of our Lord throughout His earthly ministry. "He came unto his own, and his own received him not" (John 1:11). This world has never had room for Christ. Do you have room for Him in your thoughts, your reading, your planning, your conversation, or your life?

At that time there were lowly shepherds in the Judean hill country, watching over their flocks by night. As 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. It is no wonder that these men were filled with fear. Most anyone would have been under the circumstances.

Seeking to calm the shepherds, who had been the first to hear the glorious news that Christ was born, the angel said to them, "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 town 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."

The babe lying there in the manger was a picture of helplessness and dependence, yet He was the hope of mankind. God honored these shepherds thus because they were faithful to duty, as well as receptive to His message.

The angel revealed intimate knowledge and announced the most wonderful news that was ever given to man. Instantly the heavenly hosts sounded forth a paean of praise to God because of the birth of the Saviour. The angelic hosts sang praises to God because of His wondrous gift of the Prince Who had come to bring peace to the hearts and minds of the people of this sin-cursed world.

Stirred profoundly at hearing that lovely carol and its wondrous message, immediately after the departure of the visitor from heaven "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." They felt constrained to go at once and make inquiry about the Christ. They did not wait until daylight, but, entrusting their

sheep to God's care, they promptly went to see for themselves the One about Whom the angel had brought them the good tidings of great joy. Eagerly and earnestly they hastened to Bethlehem in the full assurance that they would find "the babe lying in a manger." They were fully convinced that the message which they had received had come from the Lord.

When they arrived at their destination, the shepherds did not find any magnificent building with royal surroundings, but they found a lowly Babe surrounded with the common things that were usually kept in barns. Upon seeing the newly-born Saviour lying in a manger, the shepherds were filled with reverential awe and joyous gratitude. Immediately, they went forth to tell the wonderful story of what they had heard and had seen.

When the shepherds returned from their trip to Bethlehem, they were "glorifying and praising God for all the things that 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. Let all Christians now behold the love which God displayed at Bethlehem when Christ was born and join with the angels in singing:

"Joy to the world! The Lord is come;
Let earth receive her King;
Let every heart prepare Him room,
And heaven and nature sing."

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 the Christ Whom they had seen. In this respect they set for us, and for all others who have been the beneficiaries of His glorious gospel, a splendid example. Since all need to hear the good news which is contained in the gospel of Christ, it is obligatory that every Christian tell others what Christ has done for him and for all others whom He has saved.

If people are to be saved, they must hear about the only One Who can save them. Christ has given all whom He has saved the definite command: "Go home to thy friends, and tell them how great things the Lord hath done for thee." Since we have come to know Christ as our personal Saviour, there has been within us an impulse as deep as life itself prompting us to make Him known to others. Let us be faithful in witnessing for Him! If we will do so, joy will fill our souls.

If you who are not Christians will here and now receive this Christ into your heart as your personal Saviour, He will forgive your sin, save your soul and flood it with joy unspeakable.