

The Lamb Keepers

Emmanuel – Part III

Luke 2:8-20

Introduction

He was known as a brilliant young boy; a child prodigy; the crown jewel of Vienna. By the time he was five years of age, he had written an advanced concerto for the harpsichord. Before he turned ten, he had composed and published several violin sonatas and was playing, from memory, the best works of Bach and Handel. After his twelfth birthday, he composed and conducted his own opera and was awarded an honorary appointment as concertmaster with the Salzburg Symphony Orchestra.

My wife and I had the privilege, while in Vienna, of touring the palace grounds in Salzburg and listening to some of his works played by an orchestra. We were in the very hall where this brilliant musician once conducted the orchestra himself, as a young boy and a guest of Austria's Queen.

He died when he was only thirty-five years of age. Before his brief life ended, he had written cantatas, operettas, hymns, oratorios, forty eight symphonies, and over a dozen operas. He wrote around six hundred works in all.

His name was Johannes Chrysostomus Wolfgangus Amadeus Theophilus Mozart. With a long name like that, he had to be destined for greatness! He would certainly be made fun of on the playground!

The tragedy is that Mozart fell from his beginnings as a child prodigy to an impoverished, obscure young man. His fall from greatness was so swift and so devastating, that, by the time he died, he had virtually no true friends. He was living in

poverty, having wasted his money, and was, for the most part, forgotten. Even his widow was indifferent to his burial and only a few people came to the church for his funeral. Then, because of a sudden storm, they never went to the gravesite. By the time anyone bothered to inquire, the location of his grave was impossible to identify. The unmarked grave of Mozart, who was perhaps the most gifted composer of all time, was lost forever.¹

What a tragedy to lose such influence, prestige, and wealth; to literally go from riches to rags in a matter of years. What an incredible descent it was.

Stories abound, throughout history, of the rise and fall of individual fortunes and influence. A more recent example would be the brilliant businessman William Durant, who single-handedly created General Motors. It is said that more than fifty men became millionaires by joining his team. Unfortunately, however, through a series of poor decisions, Durant eventually lost much of his fortune and then, control of the company. In spite of all his valiant efforts, he eventually lost his bid for power and went bankrupt. The last job he had, before he died just over sixty years ago, was managing a bowling alley in Flint, Michigan. At the time, he was too poor to own one of the several million cars that had been made by a company that he had built. What an incredible reversal of fortune!

Review

Ladies and gentlemen, all of the stories that history could divulge pale in significance when you consider the story of God the Son. He gave away the splendor of heaven and the adoration of His creation,

in order to come down to planet Earth and live like man.

Now, if we were God, we, at least, would have arranged to land on satin sheets, yet He chose to be placed on prickly straw in a feed trough. We would have had the finest physicians surrounding us, yet He chose to be born where the only attendants were animals with their accompanying smell of manure in a dank, dark stable! We would have been born into one of the most prestigious, well-connected families in Jerusalem, yet He, the King of Heaven, chose to be born to impoverished peasants whose construction business barely eked out an existence.

He, by His own will, by His timeless council, went from riches to rags in the greatest reversal of fortune in the history of all time.

I invite your attention back to the gospel by Luke, to chapter 2. We have, for several discussions, been exploring the gems of truth related to this reversal of fortune in the birth of Jesus Christ.

Bethlehem was overrun with people who were crowding back into the village of their forefathers in order to register their current family members. This was by order of Caesar Augustus, a man who was being heralded as, “the savior of the world”.

In our last discussion, we watched a young couple, named Mary and Joseph, make the best of the worst of conditions. They found shelter in a Bethlehem stable, which was more than likely a shallow cave. Caves were commonly used in that region to provide shelter for the animals of travelers.

It was in that cave that Mary gave birth to Jesus. There were no doctors or nurses, no friends or even a midwife to help this frightened teenaged girl deliver her slippery son into the calloused hands of a teenaged carpenter, named Joseph.

In their hometown of Nazareth, if everything had gone according to plan, which it obviously had not, the birth of a son was cause for celebration. The proud parents would call all of their friends and relatives. The custom, during this the turn of the century, was for the father to hire musicians to come to the home to play music to celebrate the birth of a baby boy.

Mary and Joseph could not have felt more alone than at this time. They swaddled their baby by wrapping strips of cloth around his individual limbs and again around his entire body. Their cradle was Joseph’s cloak, or perhaps some fresh straw, arranged in the corner of the feeding trough. This trough was probably cut along the wall of the cave, as was the

typical arrangement in that day. There were no friends to celebrate with them or to congratulate them. And, there certainly were no musicians to call to come to the stable to sing.

A Heavenly Announcement of *The Lamb to the Lamb Keepers*

On the other hand, perhaps God the Father had arranged for some musicians after all, not to mention a host of new friends. Let us discover what God had in mind, as we continue our study of Luke, chapter 2. Begin at verses 8 through 11.

In the same region there were some shepherds staying out in the fields and keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were terribly frightened. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

This is absolutely astounding for a number of reasons! Let me give a couple of them to you.

Who God would disregard

1. First, it is astounding because of who God would disregard that night.

If you were assigned the public relations nightmare of adequately announcing and advertising the birth of God the Son, you would begin by making a list of everyone who ought to know. Then, you would make sure that they, in some way, found out. But God disregarded everyone and anyone you would have ever put on that list.

God bypassed announcing the news to the educated, the religious, the elite, the politically connected, the wealthy, the powerful. He did not announce it in the courtroom of the Sanhedrin or in the temple in Jerusalem. He did not have someone send a memo to Caesar Augustus saying something like, “You think *you’re* the savior of the world – just you wait, buster.”

Who God will dignify

2. The second astounding thing is, not only who God would disregard that night, but even more, who God would dignify that night.

The Bible informs us, in verse 8, that the most unlikely people to ever be given the news of Christ's birth were indeed notified. We read,

... there were some shepherds staying out in the fields and keeping watch over their flock by night.

Understand that, at this particular time in Jewish history, the only people considered lower than shepherds were lepers. This was because shepherds were unable to keep all of the regulations of the scribes and the Pharisees. There were regulations such as, washing hands at certain times and never touching blood or a dead animal. These were things that fit well within the shepherd's job description of delivering lambs, fighting off wolves, and eating outside on the hillsides without the benefit of purified water for cleansings.

According to the *Mishna*, which was the book of Jewish writings that codified scribal law, shepherds were under the ban; that is, they were considered unclean. They could not worship or enter the temple; they were religious outcasts.

By virtue of caring for their sheep, seven days a week, day and night, they lived in violation of some religious custom or law at all times. They worked on the Sabbath, since obviously, the sheep did not take Saturday off.

They were under the ban and were disqualified from worship, yet they were the first to officially worship the Son of God. Look who God disregarded and look who God dignified!

It is fascinating that Jesus is referred to as:

- “the good shepherd,” by Himself, in John 10:11;
- “the Chief Shepherd,” by Peter, in I Peter 5:4; and,
- “the great Shepherd,” in Hebrews 13:20.

“Shepherding,” in fact, has become a metaphor for a lifetime of service and calling to ministry. It is the title that Christ chose to give to those men who serve the church, lead the church, and feed the church. Of all the titles He could have bestowed on this God-ordained office of loving leadership and careful feeding, He chose the title “poimenas,” or “shepherds”. Other terms used are “episkopos” and “presbuteros,” however, when the apostle Paul summarized the offices of men given as gifts to the church, in Ephesians, chapter 4, verse 11, he used the term “poimenas” to refer to, what we call, the pastoral office. “Poimenas” means literally, “those

who feed,” and is translated, “shepherds” and “pastors”.

I will tell you the story of my license plate. A few years ago, a builder in our church was outfitting his company with some new trucks and semi-retiring from the field. He asked if I would like to have his “Chevy” pickup truck. He said, “It’s got 140,000 miles on it, but it’s in great shape. You can have it if you want it.”

I said, “Well, let me check with my financial advisors and I’ll get back to you.”

No, I said, “Are you kidding?!”

There is nothing quite like a pickup truck. I love to pick up guest speakers at the airport. I can only imagine what they think! This past year I picked up the president of a Christian organization at the airport. He got into my truck and said, “You know, I don’t believe I’ve ever ridden in one of these before.”

I said, “Man, you’re in for the ride of your life.”

I see some of you driving into the church parking lot in your Mercedes and BMWs and I feel so sorry for you. What a waste of money, when you could drive a pickup truck! Well, anyway, I told my wife, when I got the truck, that I was going to get a vanity license plate. She said, “What are you going to put on it?”

I said, “Shepherd.”

Isn’t that great?! I went down to the Division of Motor Vehicles and waited in line for about three hours. I finally got to the counter, where a rather irritated young woman sat. I would be too, if I had her job. I said, “I want to get one of those license plates with a word on it instead of numbers.”

She said, “Okay, what’s the word.”

I said, “Shepherd.”

People turned to look at me. She typed it in on her computer, and then said, “Nope, sorry, someone’s already got it.”

I thought, “Some other pastor, somewhere in North Carolina, stole my idea. That was my idea!”

I stood there thinking, “If I don’t get something about the pastorate now, it’ll be too late. I know I won’t come in later and change it.”

Then, it “hit” me! I said to her, “I’ll bet no one has the Greek word for shepherds.”

She just looked at me. I said, “Type this in, ‘P-O-I-M-E-N-A-S’.”

She typed it in, and then said, “Well, whaddya know, nobody’s got it.”

I came home so excited. I told Marsha, “Honey I’ve got a license plate that has the word for pastors, or shepherds, in the Greek language. I couldn’t get it in English, but I got it in Greek.”

She was quiet for minute, and then said, “Well, Honey, with the way you drive, I’m glad it’s in Greek.”

I did not think that was funny either.

A name that I claim with a great joy was once an indictment and a blight on a class of men.

By the way, know as well, that shepherds were not allowed to be witnesses in any Jewish court of law. They were considered unreliable because they were not men of the temple. They were unclean; unworthy of bearing testimony before men.

Yet, God chose the shepherds to be the first to testify of His Son’s birth. At the very beginning of His Son’s earthly life, you cannot miss the grace of God. Look who He disregarded! Look who He dignified!

Paul wrote, in I Corinthians, chapter 1, verses 26 through 28a,

For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen . . .

Let me say one more thing about these shepherds, before we move on. The text tells us that they were in the vicinity of Bethlehem. Bethlehem was only six miles south of Jerusalem; it was the rural outskirts of the holy city.

Jerusalem, of course, would swell with several million Jews during Passover, as they came with their lambs to sacrifice in celebration of their former deliverance from Egypt. You may remember the story in Exodus, chapter 12, when the death angel came sweeping in, killing the first born of every family, including Pharaoh’s family. The only way to stay the death angel was to put lamb’s blood on the door of their homes. Those who had the blood of the lamb were safe, as the angel passed over their hut. That event began the tradition of this annual celebration.

Josephus, a first century Jewish historian, records that approximately 250,000 lambs were killed and eaten during the annual Passover feast in Jerusalem. Where did all those sheep come from? Many people raised their own, but the temple also raised sheep, as well as other animals, which were sold to worshipers who came without an animal to sacrifice.

Could these shepherds, this night, have been on the temple payroll to watch over sheep destined for temple sacrifice? I believe there is little doubt. One of the most confirming evidences is a rule recorded in the *Mishna*. It was stated, in printed law, that any animals found between Jerusalem and a small village nearby were to be available at any time for sacrifice in the temple at Jerusalem. And, that little village’s name was, Bethlehem!

These shepherds were temple shepherds. They were keeping watch over sheep that were destined to become one of the thousands upon thousands of lambs headed for the alter to atone for the sins of the people.

Can you realize now, the beauty and significance of God’s announcement? He announced the birth of *the* final sacrificial Lamb to men watching over sacrificial lambs. He announced to men who were considered sinful and out of fellowship with God, that the ultimate Passover Lamb had been born and His blood would cleanse sinners and bring into fellowship those who were outcast from God.

The lamb keepers were the first to hear that the Lamb has just been born. This displays a volume of rich truth that reveals the wonderful, deep, condescending grace of God!

And, that is just verse 8. Verse 9 is where things really start to get good. Look at that verse.

And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, . . .

By the way, angels have not been seen for five hundred years. For five hundred years, no angel has been seen by man on earth. Then, suddenly, there are angels showing up everywhere.

The angel Gabriel came to Zacharias in Luke, chapter 1, verse 19. Gabriel came to Mary in Luke, chapter 1, verse 26. Gabriel seems to be one of God’s chief messengers to humans. It was Gabriel who spoke to Daniel in Daniel, chapter 8, verse 16, and again in Daniel, chapter 9, verse 21. I believe it was most likely Gabriel who was speaking to the shepherds. Notice further in Luke, chapter 2, verse 9.

. . . and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were terribly frightened.

You could track the phrase, “the glory of the Lord,” through the Bible and note that, for centuries, “the glory of the Lord” has not shown anywhere; it has departed; it had left the temple; it had left the people. There was no “shekinah” glory of God in the holy of holies. Because of their disobedience and rebellion, the glory of the Lord was gone. And now, suddenly, angels are appearing and the glory, which is the “shekinah” glory of God, is surrounding these shepherds in its brilliance.

The text tells us that they, the shepherds, were terribly frightened. Continue to verses 10 and 11.

But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; . . .

(That is easy for you to say!)

. . . for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you . . .

(That “for you” is a wonderful expression, by the way. It is personal. Why don’t you do what I have done and write your name in the margin by that phrase. My Bible reads, “. . . there has been born for Stephen . . .”)

. . . a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

Three titles for Jesus

Three titles, or names, are given in verse 11 for Jesus. Let us take a look at them.

Savior

1. The first designation is Savior.

This title was especially understood by the Gentile. It was known and used in the Gentile world. In fact, as I have mentioned before, Caesar Augustus claimed the title for himself.

With each name or title, we get even more specific.

Christ

2. The next title is “Christos” or Christ.

This title was especially understood by the Jews. It meant, “anointed One,” and was specifically related to the Messianic office. Only the Messiah could claim the title of Christ.

The last title was the summary of it all. It was breathtaking in its claim.

Lord

3. The last title was Lord.

“Kurios,” or Lord was the Greek counterpart of the Hebrew term Yahweh. In fact, throughout the Greek translation of the Old Testament, more than six thousand times, Yahweh is translated “kurios”.

Ladies and gentlemen, Lord means God. The angelic messenger was telling us, “for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is the ‘anointed One,’ who is, none other than, God.”

A Jehovah’s Witness cannot say that. A Mormon cannot say that. A Muslim cannot say that. They can say that Jesus was anointed and they can say that Jesus was a Savior, but they cannot say that Jesus was God in the flesh.

That is why the apostle Paul said, in Romans, chapter 10, verse 9, that in order to be saved, you must confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord. Jesus is the visible expression of deity. One day, when we look into the face of Jesus, we will indeed be looking into the face of God.

Notice verse 13.

And suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

Now, were the angels singing? Verse 13 says that the heavenly host was praising God and saying, not singing. The original word that is translated “praising,” is the verb “aineo”. It is rarely used in the Greek New Testament. However, it is often used in the Greek Old Testament, called the Septuagint, for the verb “halal”. That Hebrew verb means to praise, primarily through singing. “Aineo” was interchangeable with “halal”. Both words, I believe, referred to praising God through song.

Verse 13 could be translated, “. . . a multitude of the heavenly host were praising God with these words . . .”. Then, in verse 14 we are given, clearly and in poetic form, the lyrics of their song. Look at that verse.

Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased.

We know, from Job, chapter 38, that angels sang at the dawn of creation. We also know, from Revelation, that the citizens of heaven sing to the Lamb and angels join with them. So, at this significant moment of the incarnation, the angelic hosts burst forth with song.

Now, I must warn you, it was not exactly Handel's Messiah. Perhaps, by way of televised newscasts, you have heard snippets of the singing of a rabbi or an orthodox Jewish group singing at Israel's wailing wall or at a festival. It is a chanting type of singing that is mostly in monotone. It is beautiful to their ears, but strange to ours.

In Luke, chapter 2, I believe that they are singing that type of song. You do not have the big angels singing bass and the little angels singing tenor. It was a poetic, monotone chanting, swelling and praising. This unnumbered host of angels must have shaken the ground with their chanting, as well as terrified the shepherds with holy wonder.

Now look at verses 15 and 16.

When the angels had gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds began saying to one another, "Let us go straight to Bethlehem then, and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has made known to us." So they came in a hurry and found their way to Mary and Joseph, and the baby as He lay in the manger.

The verb that is translated "found their way," means literally, "to discover after searching". What was the sign? A baby? Perhaps there were several born that night. But this baby was lying in a feed

trough. This was not a custom, this was poverty stricken. Continue to verses 17 through 20.

When they had seen this, they made known the statement which had been told them about this Child. And all who heard it wondered at the things which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary treasured all these things, pondering them in her heart. The shepherds went back, glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen, just as had been told them.

Did you notice that the shepherds are now glorifying and praising God? That is what the angels were doing earlier. The first century lamb keepers were fast learners.

That is why the angels are not doing this on earth now. God could send more angels, couldn't He? Why doesn't He? Why doesn't He write the message of His Son's authenticity in the clouds? Why doesn't He shake the earth with the chanting of angels again?

He could! But He has chosen, from this point until the book of Revelation, to use ordinary, plain, sinful, forgiven, once outcast, once alienated from worship, now redeemed from sin and guilt, now in fellowship with God the Father, believers. For, today, we, who believe that Jesus is God, have, within our hearts, the Lamb of God. We are, today, twenty-first century keepers of the Lamb.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 12/23/2001 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ Charles R. Swindoll, Growing Strong in the Seasons of Life (Portland, OR, Multnomah Press, 1983), p. 177.