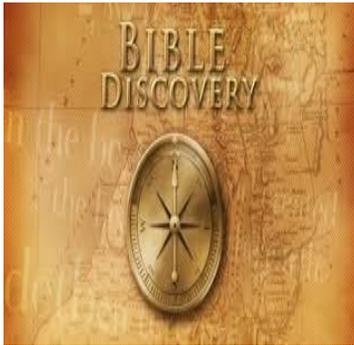


Christ's Wonder Seen by Those Who Receive Him



A king was born! Surely this occurred at the capital within the royal palace – right? Nope! Then the royal couple must've found secluded confines within the hospital – a special wing resplendent with news media (*we all remember Princess Charlotte born last spring*) and of course security? Wrong again! At the time, Bethlehem was anything but a capital of anything - simply a small community – depending on the time of year 300 – 1000 people. No capital, no hospital, no royal couple, no security.

Interestingly, Bethlehem, the place of Jesus' birth, remains small by city standards with a population today of just over 25,000. Not surprisingly, today its main industry is tourism so it has plenty of hotels. But that wasn't the case when Jesus was born. Often travelers stayed with relatives or in wayside "inns" where they found space on the floor out of the elements; hopefully close to the fire for warmth. When Mary and Joseph arrived in Bethlehem they'd been travelling for about three days to cover the 70-90 miles from Nazareth (depending on if Joseph chose the Jewish practice of going around Samaria) They were returning to Joseph's ancestral home in keeping with Jewish practice to register in the census ordered by Caesar Augustus, administered by Quirinius – the first of its kind but obviously not its last. This first census was conducted because the Roman government needed to know everyone in the Empire was paying their fair share of taxes; carried out all over the Empire which consisted of most of Europe, except that in Palestine, it was carried out in a Jewish way rather than a Roman way meaning families registered in their historical tribal town. While following this custom made the ordeal as culturally inoffensive as possible it remained a painful reminder of Israel's position under the thumb of Rome. This also meant Joseph and a very pregnant Mary travelled from Nazareth to Bethlehem, allowing Jesus to be born in the royal town of David thus fulfilling OT prophecy.

Amid such conditions a king was born! Present at such a world changing event you'd expect to see Kings, princes, dignitaries. But that isn't the scene you see. The influential, the respectable, the authorities were all about their business unaware of events taking place in that out-of-the-way stable. What we do see are parents of meager means caring for their new baby in a barn – YES! God chose the humblest of circumstances to reveal His presence; God chose a

Amid such conditions a King was born!

poor family acquainted with struggles, hunger, disappointment, sorrow and worry, to make Himself known to a fallen, drifted, thankless creation. If ever God had had opportunity to make the headlines, grab back the attention of His creation, establish His rightful position over them, it was when He provided the gift of redemption. Yet God didn't do it. Jesus, God's Son, set a course to show He understood; that *His* compassion came solely from a place of personal experience; that He truly cared for the average Joe, that the masses that'd seemingly been forgotten by the great leaders of the day were not forsaken by God.

Yes, God's king was born! With His coming, what are the first names in that guestbook? Not royalty, not the elite, not even the media showed up. No the guest book's first entries were the names of ordinary shepherds coming from nearby fields to see the One and Only Gift of God incarnate they'd been told about while they watched over the sheep. They came telling of God's own messengers who lit up the night sky announcing the child's birth. What a contrast! A humble birth is accompanied by awesome display of the heavenly host. Shepherds, privileged to share the moment, become bearers of a story full of wonder. The very ones nobody paid attention to as they smelled like sheep greeted the Saviour. They didn't have refined social skills. They are the social outcasts of their day. They told the wrong jokes, knew

Humble birth accompanied by awesome display of heavenly host!

the wrong people; offered nothing of influence to anyone. They couldn't even enter the temple down in Jerusalem when they delivered sheep - they were considered "unclean". They're just regular working-class people given a history-making role in the greatest drama in history. They serve as our reminder the story of Christmas isn't set aside for the world's elite - Jesus has been born for everyday people just like you and me. The story of Christmas is that Jesus didn't come to save the self-righteous - He came to save us who really, desperately need HIM!

Yes, a king was born! Born in Bethlehem, which incidentally means "House of Bread" with all the connotations of the feeding of the Israelites with manna during their wandering years in the desert; against a backdrop of the sepulchers of David, Ezekiel, Asaph, Job, Jesse and Solomon - all located near Bethlehem according to a 4th century report by the Pilgrim of Bordeaux. "She gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn." Yes, a peasant child born in a stable yet of royal birth; seemingly a child of poverty born to lower class parents yet heralded by an angelic host; a child wrapped in swaddling clothes around his arms and legs to cover and protect him yet the Saviour come to wrap us in the arms of God's amazing grace. The contrast between the ordinariness of His austere birth and the supreme greatness of the child who lay in the manger - the Son of God - can't be more significant. The promised one of God enters creation with prophecies fulfilled because of a decree by foreign occupation so this child is born in the promised city of messianic origin - who would have guessed that? Remember Nathanael when Philip encourages him "come and see" (pointing to Jesus of Nazareth)? Nathanael's response was a diminutive, "Nazareth! Can anything good come for there?" [John 1:46-47] But we know Jesus was not just from Nazareth which gave Him a humble, lowly, disdainful position; we know He was born in Bethlehem and of royal blood. Again and again appearances are deceiving - Jesus' birth is the arrival of God's divine activity in the hearts of humankind provoking no less than joy, deep reflection, attentiveness and self-assessment in the hearts of all people today - or certainly it should! For the shepherds it did bring a response - "Let us go and see this thing the angels have told us about!" Then having seen Jesus, they return praising God. For Mary it's why she ponders the events that occur and why she's able to relay to the Apostles so many years later the details of that first Christmas morning. God's quietly at work, and a stable is our Messiah's first earthly throne room. This birth is no mere arrival of a new life, as poignant as each such event is. This child is born a king in



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Most important is message of angel: Jesus is born for you and me!

the City of David as the Saviour and identified as the Lord! What's more and most important to you and me is the message of the angel that Jesus is "born to you"! Born for me and for you! Writer Dave Overholt explains the crucial timing of God's response to human need. At the time of Jesus' birth, only about 2% of the world's historic population had existed which means as Erik Kreps of the Survey Research Center of the University of Michigan's Institute of Social Research says, "God's timing couldn't have been more perfect. Christ showed up just before the exponential explosion in the world's population."

All this should culminate in Jesus' birth sparking joy, surprise and wonder. As the emotions flowed from the experience of the shepherds, *what is our experience in Christ today?* Do we see our salvation come to us? Do we recognize that God chose freely to suspend His glory coming to us in humble circumstance so we could have life? Born in the ancient equivalent of a tent village, Jesus arrives to fulfill God's promise bringing us hope, peace, joy and love. This God of the universe chose to reach out to all people through His wonderful grace regardless of their social status, geographic location or political persuasion. The message is for *all the people*. The praise of the heavenly host offers honour to God and peace "to (all) on whom His favour rests". This clarifies Jesus comes to bring salvation to all those who accept the favour of God's grace. Have you accepted this wonderful gift? Don't delay!

Where's the praise in our hearts today?

Where's our joy? For the birth of Jesus, told by Luke, experienced by shepherds, excepted by so many through the ages, each who've found the angel's words true, who like the shepherds that first Christmas morn have found the events told took place just as they had been told, the response has always been one of praise and joy. Today God's Word continues to demonstrate His plan strategically at work in our lives. May we break out in praise to God because He's sent Jesus as our Saviour, Lord, Messiah; King! May we be those who see the wonder of God's Son, the Christ, our Saviour, and stand amazed as we receive HIM as our King!

If you have questions about Jesus – the Jesus born in Bethlehem, in a manger yet a King; if you do not know this Jesus who came to save you from your sins; if you've never celebrated with joy and praise the birth of redemption come to you, wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger; if you've never visited the Christ child and come from Him praising, glorifying God and telling everyone of what you've seen, then may you know that wonderful joy this Christmas! Give us a call or send an email and let us know of your wonderful discovery as you too testify of the wonder among those who receive Him!



Blessing,

Pastor Dave