

# The Birth of Hope

25 Dec. 2011

Luke 2:6-18; Isaiah 9:6-7

Over the past few weeks we have been looking at some of the events that led up to the birth of the Lord Jesus. We have considered the Preparation, the Promise and the Journey. Today, on this most special of days, we will focus on the Birth of Hope.

One of the special things about the message of Christmas is that it is not only centred in recorded history, but also in a small town called Bethlehem, a place you can still visit today.

Joseph and Mary had undertaken an arduous journey from their home in Nazareth, to fulfil the requirements of the law by Joseph registering himself at his clans hometown of Bethlehem.

Soon after their arrival in the town, Joseph searched for a suitable place for them to stay. All he could find was an animal shelter - what we would call a stable. It was not very comfortable and not very hygienic, but it gave them some protection from the weather.

That night, Mary gave birth to Jesus. Joseph not only cared for Mary, but also made a bed of straw for Jesus in a manger - an animals feeding trough.

It is a simple and short story, obviously recounted by Mary and Joseph as part of their **family history**, and later shared with some of the disciples of Jesus. It was finally put into written form by Luke, at a time when some, if not all, of the brothers and sisters of Jesus would still have been alive.

The wonderful story for us, however, is not just the birth of the Lord Jesus, **BUT**, the birth of hope that came to people in the days, weeks and months after the birth of Jesus. Over the next few weeks we will look at some of these stories. For today, however, I want us to look at the story of the shepherds.

On the night when Jesus was born, life for most people continued on as usual, except for a small band of shepherds tending their sheep on the hills near Bethlehem. The fact that the sheep were not in an enclosure tells us that it was not cold, as in winter, but most likely sometime from late spring to early autumn.

While these shepherds were sitting together, probably musing over the affairs of the world as men so often do, they suddenly saw something they had never seen before.

It was an angel glowing with the shekinah glory of God. I am certain this would make the bravest of men fearful, and they were no exception. The angel was not just an apparition, or a mirage, because he/it spoke to them; *'Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people.'* (vs.10)

This was an announcement of good news that would have global impact - **'to all people'**.

Just think, what possible news could anyone announce that would have global significance for today? Not only that, what good news could we hope for, of that kind of magnitude?

In vss.11-12 we read what this world shattering news was; *'For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger.'*

Did the angel say Christ, the promised messiah, has been born? **If only that was true!** For how long have the prophets and teachers been telling us that **one day** the messiah would come to save us? **Is this what it is all about?**

**But, how is a baby going to save us?**

**We thought God's messiah would be a mighty man, like King David, who crushed all his enemies. And what's this about a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths!** That's not so unusual, because it was a common practice at that time. **The baby is lying in a manger - an animals feeding trough? Well, that's different!**

Before the shepherds could discuss the angel's news flash, the place was suddenly filled with many more angels, and they were carrying on such a commotion of praising God; *'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom His favour rests!'* (vs.14)

Now, we know God loves children, BUT, why would He be **so interested** in announcing **to us** the birth of one little baby? There was obviously something happening here that was much bigger than any of these shepherds could fully comprehend.

Finally, when all the commotion had ceased, the shepherds took stock of the situation. **Was it a dream? Was it a mass hallucination?**

Did what we see and hear really happen?

There was only one thing to do. **Check it out!**

The shepherds decided to go down into Bethlehem and see if they could find what the angel had described to them; *'Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us.'* (vs.15)

Once they had arrived in Bethlehem, they found Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus, just as the angel had described. Apart from the stable, it was a fairly ordinary scene of a mother and father with a new born babe. **Then the penny dropped!**

The whole scene before them was not so much about the birth of a baby. **It was about the birth of realised HOPE.** This was why there had been the announcement by the angel.

**For centuries**, God had been speaking through the prophets preparing the people for what God was going to do for them in the future.

**For generations**, fathers had been passing on God's words to their children and grandchildren.

**For a long, long time**, men and women had been waiting, with expectant hearts, for the fulfillment of God's promises.

In this baby before them, the shepherds now saw, not only the fulfillment of God's promises, but a **new future** and a **new hope** for **ALL** mankind.

God had declared to the shepherds that, in this baby before them, God was making a new beginning that was going to change the world forever.

It was not going to be an instant transformation.

It was not going to be a 'New Order' imposed on mankind, like so many warlords, kings and presidents have tried to do in the past. In this baby, God was announcing something new and wonderful that would touch the very spirit of all mankind.

**It was like an invitation!** God's invitation to the greatest and the least - even to humble shepherds.

For people **who are not interested** in receiving this message of God, their lives will largely continue as they have before. They will not know the joy and the hope God has announced to the world.

For those, **who are interested** in what God wants to do in their lives, here, in this little babe, God is making a statement to the world.

This child will bring such joy and blessing to so many people. He would be **THE ONE** to reconnect people with God in a new and special way.

The shepherds understood that this baby would be the one to re-ignite, and re-invigorate, people's faith and hope in God. This is why the shepherds then went out and shared with everyone the message of the angel concerning this child born in their town.

**Today, once again, we come to consider the importance and place of the birth of the Lord Jesus in our own lives.** Is his birth just an excuse for a large party or celebration, OR, will you look on the birth of Jesus as **God's news flash** to you.

In Jesus, God is saying **YOU matter to HIM.**

In Jesus, God is declaring His plans to give you joy, hope and fulfillment beyond the normal life experiences.

In Jesus, as God's chosen messiah, He has established His way of salvation that is both life changing and life transforming.

May this Christmas be, for you, a time of refreshment and re-awakening, as you look at, and experience, the wonder of the birth of Jesus through new eyes.

May it be for you a time of new birth, as you think on the gift of God's love, God's joy and God's hope in your life with Him.

May you have a truly blessed Christmas.  
AMEN