10-22-17

*The Gospel of Luke*

**The Birth of Christ (Luke 2:1-20)**

*Intro*

Chapter one of Luke closes with the last we hear from John the Baptist until he reappears as an adult.  It simply says that he grew and became strong in spirit in the wilderness.  As that chapter closes with John, the next chapter begins with what I'll be sharing with you today.

Let us read Luke 2:1-20

The main focal point of this passage of scripture is the birth of Jesus.  When we read the text, it looks nothing at all like the Christmas the world celebrates at all…so here's a little history:

     -  at around the 4th century, around the time of Constantine, the bishop of Jerusalem wrote a letter to the bishop of Rome.  In his letter, he asked the bishop to determine the birthday of Christ so that it might be celebrated.  After a while, the bishop wrote back that he believed the birth of Christ took place on December 25th.  There's absolutely no historical evidence that December 25th was the birthday of Christ.  This date was completely arbitrary….so why did he pick it?  For centuries different civilizations and pagan cultures celebrated around the end of the year because of the winter and the anticipation of spring.  The celebrations were in the hopes of warmth and crops to grow again.  Let's take a moment to look at a few:

          -  The Romans: Romans had their own celebration in December called Saturnalia.  During this celebration, they worshipped and celebrated the God of agriculture.  Gifts were commonly exchanged.  These gifts were often small idols and trinkets.  It was also common practice to hang evergreen branches around your home and decorate them with ornaments

          -  The Norsemen: further north were the Norseman or Vikings.  They celebrated in December as well, their celebration was called Yule, or Yuletide.  During their celebration, they honored their gods Thor and Odin and celebrated through various parties and excessive drinking

          -  The Druids: in England the druids celebrated in a December through collecting sacred mistletoe and sacrifices.  Mistletoe was revered by the druids.  These pagan priests would go to oak trees and cut down mistletoe with a golden sickle and collect them.  After collecting them they would sacrifice 2 white oxen.  The mistletoe would then be given to the people.  The mistletoe represented peace and whenever people would walk underneath them, they would be forced to embrace.

The bishop of Rome tried to make a shrewd move.  He saw that December and the end of the year were completely dominated by pagan and godless holidays and celebrations.  So he decided to inject Christ into December.  His thought was to sanctify December by bringing the pure birth of Christ into December.  Instead of Christmas sanctifying December and eliminating all these pagan and godless rituals, these traditions have infiltrated and corrupted Christmas…and to this day, the world celebrates a Christmas that is the furthest thing from the text that we read today.

*Caesar Augustus*

As we begin in verse 1, we read that Caesar Augustus sent out a decree.  To really appreciate what is going on here, we have to understand a little background on Caesar Augustus.  Augustus was not a name, it was a title…it meant “revered one”. His birth name was Octavian.  He was the nephew of Julius caesar and was his hand picked heir.  After Julius Caesar was murdered as we most likely learned in high school, Octavian took the throne and shared it with mark antony.  Antony was married to Octavians sister but left her for cleopatra.  This caused a battle between the Egyptians and Antony and Octavian.  In the end Octavian defeated Antony and became the sole ruler.  During his time as Caesar, he brought great peace to the land, ended all civil wars and was known for his strategy and wisdom.  There are even writers who referred to him at that time as the savior of the world.  Over his expansive territory, he wanted to have a census done.  The census was done for two reasons.  The first was to determine who was fit to join the armed forces and the other was to determine taxes.  So Octavian made it a decree in verse 1 that all people go to their place of origin in order to register for the census.  Little did he know, that his decree for what he thought were solely his selfish purposes were fulfilling the prophecy of the messiah.

*Prophecies & Sovereignty*

Now as we get back to the text, we recognize something about Luke who wrote this…he writes in very simple, clear language about the birth of Christ.  Any of the people reading this text at that time knew a few things.  According to Old Testament scripture the messiah would be King and would come from the line of a David.  But the people of that time were also likely familiar with another Old Testament passage…Micah 5:2

“But as for you Bethlehem, too little to be among the clans of Judah.  From You one will go forth for me to be ruler in Israel.  His goings forth are from long ago.  From the days of eternity”

This passage of scripture makes it clear that the messiah is one that will come from Bethlehem.  But according to verse 4 of our text, we see that joseph is in Galilee which is nearly 80 miles from Bethlehem.  That's literally from here to Lancaster!  Put yourself in their shoes for a minute.  You have word from an angel that you are carrying the messiah, your wife is near delivery, and now you have to trek over mountainous terrain because of the decree of a godless pagan ruler.  Joseph was 15 years old, Mary was 13 and this is what they were faced with.  (When I was 15 I was playing video games).  They likely didn't know this prophecy, they only knew they had to go.  They were confused, distraught….They didn't know what God was doing….God was sovereign

     -  why does God allow things to happen?  Why do forest fires consume California and destroy everything in sight?  Why does a man go to the 32nd floor of a hotel and completely decimate masses of human life?  Why do our children get sick?  Why do we lose our loved ones?…….in each of these instances we don't know….but what we do know is that everything in the Word says that God is sovereign.  We take comfort in the fact that we don't live in a randomly chaotic world but God is sovereign.

*The Birth*

As we read ones 6 and 7 speak to her giving birth and it's very simple and plain of a birth.  There's no extravagance to it.  They don't speak about details of the delivery, how long it took or how painful it was….it simply says she gave birth.  And it says that he was laid in a manger.

     -  This God who knows all, is everywhere and is all powerful in the universe, decided to confine himself to the body of a baby.  Completely helpless.  Needing to be fed, needing to be changed.  From 100% powerful to 100% dependent.  There is no other God in history who would humiliate himself to this extent for what he created.  But it doesn't stop there….

So why does God do this?  Why does he choose to operate this way?  Why does he choose Bethlehem which was too little to be among the clans of Judah?  Why does he choose to be confined and come to the earth as a helpless baby?  Why does he choose to be born in a feeding trough along with barn animals?  If you limit your search to these verses, you limit your sample size but if you expand into the Old Testament, you find that God seems to have a pattern.

     -  Did God choose a Esau? He was the first born!  He was stronger, likely better in battle and a hunter.  No he chose Jacob

     -  Did God choose Benjamin or Levi or Reuben?  The other more experienced older brothers.  No he chose the little innocent dreamer.

* Which son of Jesse did God choose to be King?  Let's turn our bibles to 1st samuel 16 and read that together.  This will give us a little bit more insight into the pattern I was speaking to you about.

READ 1st Samuel 1-12

Why does God choose Jacob?  Why does God choose Joseph?  Why does God choose David?  Why does God choose Bethlehem?  Why does God choose to be confined to a baby?  Why does God choose a manger?  Because he wants all the glory.  He will not share praise with man, He desires all the praise that his owed to him.  He won't share credit with a great city or a great man.  He doesn't put himself into positions where the person can take all the credit.  How does this apply to us?