

Christmas Shepherds Special 13-12-22

This is Sunday, the 22nd of December, 2013. We are going to have a special study this morning in light of the season and the impending descent of Christmas Day upon us. We'll take a moment at the outset, since we will be in the Scriptures, to go to the Lord in prayer, ask His blessing on our fellowship, our study of His Word, and the ministry of God's Spirit in our hearts.

Shall we pray? Father, what a blessing it is at any time, any day, to pause and reflect on the greatness of Your grace in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ, the blessings that have been bestowed on us, the provision that has been made for us, the opportunities that have been given to us, all because of Your unfathomable love for us. We thank You for the events that we celebrate at this season. We thank You for the birth of the Lord Jesus, which in many ways makes possible our new birth.

And we pray that as we reflect on some of the truths that pertain to those events that God the Holy Spirit will superintend, that each one of us will find the portions of Your Word that we look at meaningful, helpful, mind-changing, heart-changing, and life-changing in the time that remains to us in this life. We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

There is a well-known disparity between the Christmas that we celebrate today and the actual events of the Lord's birth. We're generally familiar with the fact that there wasn't a Christmas tree in the stable. The early church had no notion of celebrating December 25th for any reason related to the Lord Jesus.

It isn't His birthday, and so on. But many of the traditions, the whole fat man in the suit, and the reindeer in the sleigh, and up on the housetop, reindeer's plop, or whatever it is. The Frosty the Snowman, Snoopy on his doghouse.

The whole thing is a conglomeration and an accumulation and accretion of various strands of tradition. We know this, but we celebrate it in any way, and we say, you know what, the holiday is not what people try to make it. The holiday is what we make it, what I make it.

I invest it with meaning that suits me, and that is a biblical and healthy view. However, it is a fact that the holiday, with all of the best of intentions that we have for commemorating the birth of the Lord Jesus, the incarnation of the Son of God, the wisdom and humility of His mother Mary and His earthly father Joseph, the beginning of events that happened at that time, has been co-opted, corrupted, and carried off captive by various forces, largely commercial in nature. Why is it they start playing Christmas songs now in early October? It is retail sales that are in view.

Why is the Friday after Thanksgiving called Black Friday? Anybody know why it's called Black Friday? This is the day when businesses that have been in the red all year can get into the black. It's retail. It's retail, shopping, sales.

The people thronging malls and thronging Amazon and so on is a big deal. And I'm the biggest fan of free enterprise and making a living with products that you sell. I think that's great.

Keep in mind, however, that the fluffing up and perpetuation and glorification of Christmas is largely by people who aren't looking at Christ. I saw a thing somewhere where instead of sacred as an adjective for this holiday, it starts with a dollar sign and the A-C-R-E-D comes after. It's a sacred holiday and it begins with a dollar sign.

Well, these things are obvious. This is nothing really new. But it does raise an interesting question.

I told Patty, really the time to address a question like this isn't the Sunday before Christmas. It's in the summertime. If I were going to spend the rest of the lesson saying boo on Christmas, this would be the worst of all possible times to make that case.

And you can rest easy, I'm not. I won't make that case in any case. However, I do want to cover two things this morning.

One of them is kind of the wrapper for the other. And this has to do with acknowledging all of the paganism that the Catholic Church tried to sort of supersede and overcome and in some cases absorb into the winter solstice celebration yesterday, shortest day of the year. That's why Christmas is around this time.

We know it's a largely recycled holiday. It's been repurposed, reimagined. And this happened long ago.

But it does raise the question, and if you turn in your Bibles just quickly to 2 Corinthians 6, we have the command repeated, which was actually given to God's people in the Old Testament. Chapter 6, verse 14, Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. What fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? What communion has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial? What part has a believer with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols? You are the temple of the living God.

As God has said, I will dwell in them and walk among them. I will be their God. They shall be my people.

Therefore, come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you. I will be a father to you, and you shall be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty.

Now you remember that this is in fact a quote from a couple of places in the Old Testament, Isaiah, Ezekiel, 2 Samuel. But when is it that people really began to think of God as the Father? It's when the Lord Jesus came and talked of Him as the Father. You don't find the Old Testament prophets addressing God as Father.

And interestingly, when Israel was distinct and separate from the nations, they didn't call God Father. When the dispensation changed and the nation disappeared, now all we do is call the first person of the Trinity our Heavenly Father. But the promise was that when you are distinct and separate and sanctified from the world and from the corruption that it represents, that is when I will receive you, that is when I will call you my sons and daughters, and I will be a father to you, says the Lord Almighty.

So he goes on in the next verse, which we have an inconvenient chapter division here. Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God. Now, you will recall, and I'm not going to go there because I'll never get out, but, well, we will go there.

Flip back a few pages to 1 Corinthians chapter 5, because this is a rehearsal of something else. Verse 6 of chapter 5, 1 Corinthians 5 verse 6, 6. Your glorying is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Therefore purge out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened.

For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us. Therefore let us keep the feast not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. And this is about as far as I'm going to go down this road.

We recognize what kind of holiday this is. It's not a biblical holiday. It isn't anything that we are encouraged to pay any attention to whatsoever.

The Apostle Paul not only doesn't mention Christmas, he never mentions, alludes to, or makes a single point from the virgin birth. There's speculation, there's a lot of scholars who try to claim Paul didn't know Jesus was born of a virgin because there's no reference to it anywhere in his writings. The Apostle John, in his epistles and in the book of the Revelation, makes no mention of the virgin birth.

So, you know, that's one of the big elements of the season. Christ born of the Virgin Mary, yes it is in Matthew, yes it is in Luke, but it's nowhere else in the New Testament. So, we want to ensure that when we choose to make an observance, that we are doing it in sincerity and in truth.

We know what is and isn't Christmas. We know that whether we should or shouldn't get upset if they say you can't have a nativity scene on the courthouse lawn. What are we actually fighting for when we want to try to, you know, keep the Christ in Christmas in our culture and so on.

If we're going to do these things, we want to have given it some thought. We want to look at it from a biblical point of view. Paul says, if there are any observances that you want to keep, by the way, who's this letter written to? First Corinthians is written to who? Corinth.

What makes up the church in Corinth, Jews or Gentiles? Gentiles. What does he say in verse 17? I'm sorry, in verse 7. Purge out the old leaven, Christ our Passover was sacrificed for us,

therefore let us keep the feast. Keep what feast? He's talking to Gentiles and he says keep the feast.

What's the only feast in the context? Passover. Who's he talking to? Jews. Not.

Gentiles. Not Jews. Gentiles.

He's telling Gentiles purge out the leaven and keep the feast. When does the feast of unleavened bread begin? Passover, right? He's telling Gentiles, if you're going to have an observance, look at the ones that God has put in his word. That's the way to observe it.

Now, I will mention and I will refer back to this if I can remember to do so in a week or two when we come back to Ephesians. You remember what we've been looking at in terms of the dual concept of the body of Christ, literal things and what their heavenly spiritual counterpart is? This is another example. He's not telling the Gentiles, sacrifice a lamb, you know, shut the doors of your house, eat with a staff in your hand, get the bitter herbs.

What is he saying? He's saying you need to understand what the Passover represented and how it is fulfilled in Christ, and that is what you need to observe. And when you do that, you are fulfilling the law, just as Jesus did not come to destroy the law but to fulfill it. So we concentrate on the fulfillment.

Now, as I was musing on these things and making the decision to not, you know, cross Christmas off my calendar and say, no Christmas for me, the pagan, the eighth Shabbat of the Wiccans and the celebration of all of the Mithra worshippers. You can't believe all of the, you know, the whole Yule log and the Saturnalia and the, you know, oh, let's pray to the gods so the sun will come back. That's what this season of the year has always meant to pagan humankind, unregenerate fallen people have gotten all concerned.

You know, it's this mystical, the days are getting shorter and shorter. What if they just keep getting shorter and shorter and becomes darkness? We'd better do something. And so on the shortest day of the year, all of these festivals.

So the Catholics in like the fourth century or something said, you know, we've got to do something about this. We're getting all these godless people into the Catholic Church and they're still wanting to dance around worshipping Mithra and praying for the sun and let's overlay it, let's try to shoehorn it and divert it into something. Well, as I was thinking about all of this, it made me want to go back and review what actually happened.

And since if there's one fact about Christmas that is absolutely indisputably true, Jesus was not born on December 25th. Well, where was he born and what were the circumstances of his birth? And covering that, is there any application? To say, aha, I can amaze my friends with the knowledge that it's not December 25th. Well, so what? And I learned some things that I did not know.

In my lengthy sojourn on this earth, these are things I flat had never run across. It's not new. It's just not well known.

So I thought I would share them with you this morning in the anticipation of the seasonal celebration. Turn with me to the classic account of the birth of the Lord Jesus in the Gospel of Luke, Chapter 2. There are some things here that have been more or less hiding in plain sight. It came to pass in those days, a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered.

The census first took place while Quirinius was governing Syria. So all went to be registered, everyone to his own city. If you research into this, there's a lot of allegations being made that Matthew and Luke were telling two entirely different stories.

And Luke misplaces the date compared to Matthew by close to 10 years because he's placing the birth in 6 AD. I think I've mentioned in the past that Quirinius was involved in an earlier census. He was governing Syria, he wasn't governor of Syria.

And this is documented, it's known that there had been a previous census. There is one in 6 AD, yes, and Quirinius was involved in it and he was in a higher office at that time. But he had been involved in one 10 years earlier.

This is why they probably put him in charge of the one in 6 AD because he already knew how to do it. He had done it 10 years earlier. At any rate, all went to be registered, everyone to his own city.

Joseph went up from Galilee out of the city of Nazareth into Judea to the city of David which is called Bethlehem because he was of the house and lineage of David to be registered with Mary, his betrothed wife who was with child. So it was that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger because there was no room for them in the house.

Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields keeping watch over their flock by night. And look, an angel of the Lord stood before them and the glory of the Lord shone around them and they were greatly afraid. Then the angel said to them, Do not be afraid, for look, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people.

For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord. This will be the sign to you. You will find a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes lying in a manger.

These two details were given to us previously, right? Now they're given again. Suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest on earth, Peace toward men of good will. So it was when the angels had gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass which the Lord has made known to us.

They came with haste and found Mary and Joseph evidently with no trouble whatsoever and the babe lying in a manger. When they had seen him they made widely known the saying which was told them concerning this child. All who heard it marveled at those things which were told them by the shepherds.

Mary kept these things and pondered them in her heart. Then the shepherds returned glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen as it was told them. Here's some of what I have gathered this week.

If you think about the ritual Levitical worship centered in Jerusalem, one of its features is the daily offering, the daily sacrifice. This sacrifice is actually scheduled at the beginning and at the end of every day. The sacrifices are detailed in Numbers chapter 28 verses 1 through 8. And this is what is required.

There is to be a lamb offered in the morning and again in the late afternoon. You can read about it in Numbers 28. It was the first offering of the day and it was typically, except in special occasions, the last offering of the day.

It is the only sacrifice, the only sacrifice in the Old Testament Scriptures that strictly called for a male unblemished lamb. First sacrifice of the day, last sacrifice of the day, it is a requirement that it be an unblemished male lamb. And you can't substitute it.

You can't swap something else in for it. Other sacrifices, even at Passover, this could be a goat, it could be a bullock as well as a lamb. You can find that in Leviticus 22.

But this daily sacrifice is called the Tamid, T-A-M-I-D or I-Y-D depending on how you do your transliterations. Tamid literally means continual in Hebrew because this was the continuing sacrifice, this was the daily observance. A almost identical word, Tamim, is the word used for the unblemished male lamb.

He's perfect, he's unspotted, unflawed, unscarred, unblemished. Tamim. This is the same word that describes Noah in his generations in Genesis 6, verse 9. Remember it says he was perfect in his generations? He was unspotted, unblemished.

It is also the word that God used when he was talking to Abraham in Genesis 17, verse 1. Remember when God comes and walk before me and be thou Tamim. The schedule for these daily sacrifices is interesting because the first one in the morning was scheduled at the third hour. The second one, the closing sacrifice of the day, was scheduled at the ninth hour.

If you read Mark, chapter 15, verse 25, you find that they put Jesus on the cross at the third hour. If you continue in that chapter to verses 34 through 37, you find out that he died at the ninth hour. He spent a total of six hours on the cross, three hours of them were darkness.

The latter three hours. But he was placed on the cross at the third hour. This is the moment at which that morning unblemished lamb was sacrificed.

And he finished his work at the ninth hour, which is when the last unblemished lamb was sacrificed. Now, if you think about it, this is two lambs a day, 360 odd days in a year. So how many lambs does this require annually? It's a minimum of 720 lambs.

This doesn't count all of the other sacrifices. The sacrificial system is a huge resource-intensive operation when it comes to animals available for sacrifice. Where did these animals come from? When you read Jewish traditional literature describing these days in Midrash, in the Gemara, the Talmud, the various records that we have that go back to those days and those times, we find that the main source, the primary source, especially for these lambs, was Bethlehem.

Bethlehem was the place where these sacrificial animals were raised. And as you read Philo, as you read Josephus' Antiquities of the Jews, you discover that there was an industry centered in Bethlehem around the production of, care for, and delivery of these lambs. So much so that the priesthood in Jerusalem required that these shepherds be special shepherds.

They had to meet specific requirements. They had to conform to many of the laws of cleanliness and sanctification that applied to priests who operated in the temple precincts because these lambs were known to be headed in that direction. If the lamb is truly to be without spot and without blemish, it can't be defiled or contaminated by defiled and contaminated shepherds.

So from their birth, these flocks were special. And unblemished, unspotted lambs were set aside and were cared for especially by these special shepherds because they had to be what we would call today kosher in terms of preparation for the sacrifice. What I find particularly interesting in this regard is that for the shepherds to hear that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem, in fact, the biblical statement which was known even when the wise men show up later and talk to Herod, where is the Messiah going to be born? Bethlehem.

As soon as people thought of Bethlehem, one of the things you think of, you say Chicago, windy city. You say Dallas, you think of the Cowboys. You say Boston, you think of Faneuil Hall or something like that.

You think of Philadelphia, you think of the birthplace of the country. There are certain things that are just sort of associated, closely associated with cities and towns. One of the things that would immediately come to mind when you talk about Bethlehem was this is the place where all of those lambs are raised.

This is where the sacrificial, the daily, twice a day, daily sacrificial lambs come from. So when you say the Messiah is to be born in Bethlehem, immediately this idea of the lamb would come to mind. Wow, he's going to be born where the sacrificial lambs come from.

Oh, he is led as a lamb to the slaughter, like a sheep before his shearers is done, so he opened not his mouth. There is a resonance just with the town, not just from its name, house of bread. I am the true bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.

You eat of this bread, you will live forever. The house of bread. But it was a well-known association.

So it is easy to imagine people hearing this account saying there is born to you this day in the city of David, Bethlehem, a Savior who is Christ the Lord. And it is announced to these shepherds. This is another one of the reasons we know that Jesus wasn't born in December, because sheep were normally brought into the fold at the end of the day to protect them.

It's a lot easier to protect them than to try to provide perimeter security out on the slopes of hillsides and things at night. And so typically they would drive the sheep down to the fold and bring them in and guard the door. I am the door of the sheep, Jesus said.

So why are these shepherds watching their flocks by night? Because this is lambing season. This is the season of the year when the lambs would be born and you can't do that in the fold. They would get trampled.

It's logistically not practical. So they would keep the sheep out and all night long they're going and assisting with the birth of these lambs. They're coming and this would go on for about a month.

It's the month of February. It's the month before the March, April, Passover season. And it is very probable that Jesus was actually, all you February birthdays, you're probably sharing the month with the Lord.

He was born sometime in that season apparently just prior to Passover. And that's why they're out watching their flocks by night. Now here's another interesting thing.

Turn to Micah 4.8. Micah 4.8. I nominate this as the most overlooked Christmas verse in the Bible. Right after Jonah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum. Micah 4.8. Our holiday, Christmas season verse.

Let's start back up in verse 6 just to get a little context. In that day, says the Lord, I will assemble the lame, I will gather the outcast and those whom I have afflicted, I will make the lame a remnant and the outcast a strong nation. This is Micah 4.6. In that day, says the Lord, I will assemble, I will gather the lame, I will gather the outcast, and those whom I have afflicted, I will make the lame a remnant and the outcast a strong nation, so the Lord will reign over them in Mount Zion from now on, even Laolam, unto the ages forever.

And you, verse 8, this is our verse, and you, O tower of the flock, the stronghold of the daughter of Zion, to you shall it come, even the former dominion shall come, the kingdom of the daughter of Jerusalem. We should make Christmas ornaments and put this verse on it. Here's why.

The phrase there, tower of the flock, this is Migdal Eder. Migdal Eder. This is the tower of the flock.

What is this? In Bethlehem, there was an assembly point, just north of the town, and at those times when they were going to gather these lambs and these other sacrificial animals that had been raised on the slopes of the hills of Judea, specifically in and around Bethlehem, this is where they were taken. They were taken to Migdal Eder, this tower, and it's an assembly point. It's a preparation point, and from here they are taken north to Jerusalem.

There's only one. At this watchtower of the flock, the shepherds who were specially trained for this task and were educated in all of the parameters of sacrifice and of Levitical requirement would take the animals that had been assembled at this tower and make sure that none of them were hurt, that they were not damaged, that they were not blemished, they were handled the way people in a packing factory handle eggs. You don't want to break any.

You don't want to mess any up. You want to inspect them and ensure that they are as perfect as they can be. During lambing season, sheep were brought to the tower from the fields, and the lower level functioned as a birthing room for the sacrificial lambs.

These animals that they were watching or the ones that had newly given birth to lambs would be immediately taken down to this tower. If they could see that a ewe was just about to give birth, they would take her down there so that nothing would go wrong during the birth. They've got light.

They've got facilities. They've got water. They've got everything they need to ensure that these lambs are not damaged, that they get the maximum number of them for sacrifice in Jerusalem.

So this was a birthing room in the bottom of the tower. There were priests who oversaw this and ensured that everything was kosher. They maintained a ceremonially clean birthing place.

Once birthed, these priestly shepherds would routinely place the lambs in hewn depressions of limestone rock known as the manger, and they would wrap the newborn lambs in swaddling clothes, preventing them from thrashing around, harming themselves, or sustaining any injury until they were calm and could be inspected for the quality of being without spot and blemish. You can find this in Jewish oral tradition. You can find it in Alfred Edersheim, *Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*.

There was no need really for the angel to give the shepherds any GPS coordinates or any Google map to get to where Mary and Joseph were and where the baby was, because when he said, you will find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes lying in a manger. And because they knew Micah 4, verse 6, that it is the Migdal Eder where the Messiah will appear, that's why they didn't have to wander. That's why they didn't have to ask.

You think about the significance of that scene, where he was and what was going on around him at that season and what it meant. We've always understood that Jesus came into the world in humble circumstances and that he was born to die. But I don't think you could find a more profound picture than this of just how marked that destiny was at his birth.

I did not know that. But these things are easily assembled from the... There are some good things about Jewish tradition. It's not all fanciful.

It's not all off the mark. And, of course, those of you that read Edersheim know that you can never go wrong reading the Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah. You learn something on every page.

But I thought I would share that with you. It's a fresh way to think of the nativity scene. It is a fresh reason to appreciate that Mary saw these things and pondered them in her heart.

You think, well, she could easily have said, why isn't there a wonderful accommodation for me in this moment of extremis when I'm about to give birth to my first child? It's been unusual enough. I've endured so much already, the naysaying and the speculations about Roman soldiers and so on. And now, the final insult, I don't even have a decent place to give birth.

And yet, that seeming negative circumstance allows God to fulfill and to picture His Word so beautifully. And it's a reminder that God does that in our lives. We cannot always see the big picture.

We can't always see the significance. But we trust that God knows what He's doing and that there is beauty in the design and the fulfillment of God's plan and purpose in our lives. We'll close here in a word of prayer.

Father, thank You for the truth of Your Word. Thank You for these things that remind us of the willingness of the Lord Jesus Christ to come and bear our sorrows, to travel and experience in this life those roads that we often find so difficult, and to serve as our example as well as our Savior. And we pray that as we remember Him at this time of the year, even as we recognize what is true and what is not about the season, we do focus on and end up looking at He who is the truth in bodily form and come to appreciate Him in fresh ways, and that this will transform us as we live what remains to us of this life, looking forward to our gathering together to Him and life before You in the eternal future.

We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.