

**“HOPE IN THE GIFT!”**  
by Rom A. Pegram (12/24/19)

Merry Christmas, everyone! Let me give you a little background into the event we celebrate tonight. The opening words of tonight’s famous section of scripture provide the setting for us; Caesar Augustus (Octavian) was ruler of “the entire Roman empire.” Caesar Augustus was the great-nephew of Julius Caesar and was a born fighter, scratching his way to the top by defeating Antony and Cleopatra, then putting the empire on solid ground that would last for centuries. It was said of Augustus that he entered a Rome made of brick ... and he left a Rome made of marble...

He was the first Caesar to be called “Augustus” when the Roman Senate voted to give him the title. ‘Augustus’ meant *holy* or *revered*, and up to that time it was a term that was reserved exclusively for the gods. It was under Augustus’ rule that strides were made toward making the Caesars gods. In fact, about the time Luke was busy writing the story we’ll hear tonight, some cities in Asia Minor adopted Caesar’s birthday, September 23, as the first day of their New Year, hailing him as a ‘savior.’ An ancient inscription has even been found that called him ... ‘savior of the whole world’ ... *and he let ‘em...*

Historian John Buchan records that when Caesar Augustus died, people actually ‘comforted themselves, remembering Augustus was a god, and gods do not die.’ So, the world had its self-proclaimed, widely accepted god and savior. Luke, however, wants us to see this world history as a backdrop for the story of the *real* Savior. Listen now ... as John reads (Luke 2:1-20, NLT):

At that time the Roman emperor, Augustus, decreed that a census should be taken throughout the Roman Empire. <sup>2</sup> (This was the first census taken when Quirinius was governor of Syria.) <sup>3</sup> All returned to their own ancestral towns to register for this census. <sup>4</sup> And because Joseph was a descendant of King David, he had to go to Bethlehem in Judea, David’s ancient home. He traveled there from the village of Nazareth in Galilee. <sup>5</sup>

He took with him Mary, his fiancée, who was now obviously pregnant.

<sup>6</sup> And while they were there, the time came for her baby to be born. <sup>7</sup> She gave birth to her first child, a son. She wrapped him snugly in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no lodging available for them.

<sup>8</sup> That night there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby, guarding their flocks of sheep. <sup>9</sup> Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord’s glory surrounded them. They were terrified, <sup>10</sup> but the angel reassured them. “Don’t be afraid!” he said. “I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. <sup>11</sup> The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David! <sup>12</sup> And you will recognize him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger.”

<sup>13</sup> Suddenly, the angel was joined by a vast host of others—the armies of heaven—praising God and saying,

<sup>14</sup> *“Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased.”*

<sup>15</sup> When the angels had returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, “Let’s go to Bethlehem! Let’s see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.”

<sup>16</sup> They hurried to the village and found Mary and Joseph. And there was the baby, lying in the manger. <sup>17</sup> After seeing him, the shepherds told everyone what had happened and what the angel had said to them about this child. <sup>18</sup> All who heard the shepherds’ story were astonished, <sup>19</sup> but Mary kept all these things in her heart and thought about them often. <sup>20</sup> The shepherds went back to their flocks, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. It was just as the angel had told them.

In contrast to Caesar’s world, Joseph and Mary’s story involves *the mystery of grace*—the King doesn’t come to the proud and powerful, but to the poor and powerless. As it turns out, life doesn’t always turn out the way the world thinks it should; in this story, humble, poor and powerless Joseph and Mary were the adoptive father and birth mother of the King of kings!

Folks, the prophet Micah (5:2, NLT) prophesied this 700 years earlier: “But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, are only a small village among all the people of Judah. Yet a ruler of Israel will come from you, one whose origins are from the distant past.” And now, a poor couple’s journey to Bethlehem to pay taxes would set the stage for the fulfillment of that prophecy. They appeared as helpless pawns caught up in the pages of secular history, but every move was under the hand of Almighty God. The Messiah would indeed be born in tiny, insignificant Bethlehem! And, the baby Mary carried was not a Caesar, a man who would become a god, but a far greater wonder—the true God who had become a man! Folks, God gave us the greatest gift he could ever give us—*the gift of Himself*. And, along with that gift, we receive great HOPE... Here’s how:

**GOD GAVE US HIMSELF THROUGH THE INCARNATION (*God becoming human*)...** Verse 6 says, “...and while they were in Bethlehem, the time came for her to have her baby.” God became human ... because he loved us...

A friend of mine, Dr. Bob Tuttle of Asbury Seminary in Florida, used to describe it this way: “Man, it must have hurt for God Almighty to squeeze himself into the body of a little bitty baby!” ... *Can you imagine?*

Here’s what one commentator said about God giving us the gift of himself: “It was clearly a leap down—as if the Son of God rose from his throne in heaven, stood poised on the rim of the universe, then dove headlong, speeding through the stars ... over the Milky Way to earth’s galaxy, where he then plunged earthward into a huddle of animals. Nothing could be lower!”

Luke finishes the picture with verse 7, speaking of Mary. He says: “She gave birth to her first child, a son. She wrapped him snugly in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no lodging available for them.” Mary would’ve counted his little fingers and toes—what new parents do ... then they wiped him as clean as they could by firelight, in that cave where they kept the animals. Mary wrapped his little arms and

legs with strips of cloth—very much like a mummy. No one helped her. Then she laid him in a feeding trough—a manger...

*The Incarnation*—God becoming human—provides a marvelous illustration for Christ’s work in our lives; did you know that? Just when we need him the most ... he enters into our lives—no matter how messy things seem to be. Jesus is always there for us, in the midst of our complications, hardships, and very human situations ... and that brings us HOPE...

*Thank you, God ... for loving us enough to meet us right where we are... Next:*

### **GOD GIVES US HIMSELF THROUGH THE MEANING (OF THE INCARNATION)...**

Verses 8-11 remind us: “That night there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby, guarding their flocks of sheep. <sup>9</sup> Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord’s glory surrounded them. They were terrified, <sup>10</sup> but the angel reassured them. “Don’t be afraid!” he said. “I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. <sup>11</sup> The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David!”

The great doctrine of the Church is that the Son of God became a real human—not just someone who *appeared to be* human! When he was born, God the Son placed all his heavenly powers on hold—under the direction of God the Father. He didn’t give up his heavenly attributes, but he submitted their power in his life to the Father’s discretion. Though he was sinless, he had a real human body, mind, and emotions—complete with their inherent human weaknesses...

And as a very real baby in the cradle, Jesus watched his tiny clenched fist with fascination, just like any other baby. He didn’t fake babyhood. He *didn’t* say to himself, “You all think I’m a pre-articulate baby discovering I have a hand. Actually I’m God admiring my brilliant invention. I’m your Creator, and I understand every word you’re saying.” NOT AT ALL!!!! Jesus wasn’t pretending, folks. *This was no pre-natal spoof!* HE WAS A REAL BABY!

God gave up a great deal ... in giving himself to us. But he loved us that much ... and his very real understanding of humanity brings us HOPE...

*Thank you, God ... for letting go of the divine ... to truly connect with our humanity...*

### **GOD GIVES US HIMSELF THROUGH THE EFFECT (OF THE INCARNATION)...**

Listen to this from verses 15-20: “When the angels had returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, ‘Let’s go to Bethlehem! Let’s see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.’ <sup>16</sup> They hurried to the village and found Mary and Joseph. And there was the baby, lying in the manger. <sup>17</sup> After seeing him, the shepherds told everyone what had happened and what the angel had said to them about this child. <sup>18</sup> All who heard the shepherds’ story were astonished, <sup>19</sup> but Mary kept all these things in her heart and thought about them often. <sup>20</sup> The shepherds went back

to their flocks, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. It was just as the angel had told them.”

Soon the angels departed, the glory that lit the countryside faded away, and stars reappeared, and the shepherds were alone, but that didn't stop them from doing what they had to do. Folks, it's not enough to hear *about* Jesus; it is not enough to peek in the manger and say: “Oh, how nice. What a lovely scene!” The truth is, *even if Jesus were born in Bethlehem a thousand times ... but not within you, you wouldn't ever know the life God has for you; the Christ who was born into the world ... must also be born in your heart!*

The effects of the Incarnation, folks, were these:

- God becoming human was *real*...
- Christ's identity was *complete*...
- Jesus understanding of our situation is *real*, because he had the same type of body we have—lived in the same world...
- His complete *identification* means he can save YOU, whatever your situation; *he understands*...
- That baby, God's Son, demands our complete *allegiance*—he's the King of kings...
- He really did come into the world, and because that's true, he can now come into your heart...

So, folks, as we celebrate the Incarnation—God becoming human—let us now lay our lives before him ... because, as the song says: *“In this world of sin, where meek souls will ... receive him still, the dear Christ enters in.”*

*Thank you, God ... for understanding who we are ... and loving us anyway ... eternally!*

Folks, this *is* the Season of HOPE. Throughout this season, we've been celebrating that. But tonight, I want to declare this also a Season of JOY! Christ really came for your JOY, you know. That's how much God loves YOU! Do you remember what the angel said (v. 10)? “...but the angel reassured them. ‘Don't be afraid!’ he said. ‘I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people.’” God wants to live in *you* today; he wants to fill *you* with his Spirit of JOY ... that *you* may know God's very best ... and that *others* might know that JOY through YOU. Would you join me now in thanking God for the HOPE and the JOY we've received?