

## Lesson 5

# Those Who Didn't Miss Him

## *A look at the characters of Luke 2*

### Introduction

A study of the intertestamental period reveals very difficult times for the Jews. While there were certainly high points with the return to the homeland spurred on by Ezra and Nehemiah, most of Israel's existence over the 400-year span of silence between Malachi and Matthew was difficult at best. Geographically situated between the two major world spheres of influence (Egypt and Syria) Israel's loyalty and allegiance went back and forth over the centuries (some by their control, but mostly through the conquest and control of others). The worst of their experience came over a 10-year span in the 160's BC as control over Judea swung back to the Syrian empire.

Syrian King Antiochus dispatched troops to Jerusalem in 168 BC on rumors of rebellion. Attacking Jerusalem on the Sabbath, he killed thousands of Jews and enslaved thousands more. The city was burned, and its remaining citizens were placed under martial law.<sup>12</sup> The walls of Jerusalem were demolished and a new citadel, Acra, was built to dominate the temple area. On top of this, the Syrian empire forced Hellenism<sup>13</sup> on the population. A command was given that the people worship the gods of the king and no others. The Jewish Temple was dedicated to Jupiter Olympus and sacrifices were offered therein. The Jews were compelled to eat unclean meat of sacrifices and those who tried to keep the old law were persecuted. Those observing the Sabbath were burned alive. Women who circumcised their sons were led publicly through the city and thrown, baby and all, over the city wall. The practice of circumcision, the mere possession of a scroll of the law, and a refusal to eat pork were all considered capital crimes.

These events led to the Maccabean Revolt, one of the bloodiest eras in Jewish history. And while the revolt accomplished some of what the Jews wanted (a brief period of self-governance and thereby the freedom to practice their religion), the goal of being completely independent and being recognized as a player on the world stage was never realized.

To fully appreciate the mood of the day as we approach the days of Jesus, it is important to keep the previous 400 years of Jewish history in mind. All the tragic events of those centuries caused Jewish hopes and expectations for the coming Messiah to lose sight of the deliverance from sin He would provide. Their hope drifted into a yearning for someone to bring political and military deliverance and

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<sup>12</sup> 1 Maccabees 1.29-40.

<sup>13</sup> Hellenization was the often-forced acceptance of Greek cultural, philosophical, and ethical ideals on the Mediterranean world. Known as the Greek way of life, it was used by the Empire as a tool to unite by introducing the Greek language and cultural institutions. Those who forced the culture on the conquered populations regarded their language and way of life as superior. Hellenism was absorbed by non-Greeks through language, personal names, and architecture. For more see: Aune, David E. "Hellenism." *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*. Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000.

domination. The hatred they possessed for their oppressors cannot be downplayed and is a key point of understanding the historical background of the time of Jesus.

In the decades leading up to His birth, and especially after the coming of the Romans in 64 BC, this reached a fever pitch. Jewish historian Josephus said that the Jews were looking for one from their own country who would govern the habitable world. Their desire for social, political, and military relief dominated the Jewish mindset like no other thing. This is a major factor in why most Jews living at the time missed Jesus. He simply did not fit their expectations of what the Messiah would look like or how He would act. In their minds they pictured an earthly king, a warrior, someone in the elite class, born in the right circles in an influential place, and someone formally educated in the ways of the day. The One who came fit none of these check boxes. In fact, Jesus came to be despised and rejected and treated with contempt.

He grew up before him like a young plant and like a root out of dry ground. He didn't have an impressive form or majesty that we should look at him, no appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of suffering who knew what sickness was. He was like someone people turned away from; he was despised and we didn't value him, Isaiah 53:2-3.

Scripture reveals that there were a few who didn't miss Him, however. The clear testimony of the Old Testament was there for all. Students of the Law and the Prophets, humble minded individuals who listened to direct communication from angels, and others who simply believed in what they witnessed, did get it.

This lesson will look at those who Luke describes in chapter 2 as *looking forward to Israel's consolation*, 2.25, and those *who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem*, 2.38. We will read about the shepherds around Bethlehem who received an angelic visit and revelation. We'll meet Simeon and Anna, who were looking forward to the day the Messiah would come.

## The Shepherds of Luke 2

The opening verses of this chapter provide us with some of the details regarding Jesus' birth. The most notable birth in history takes place in the humblest circumstances imaginable ... inside an obscure, nondescript stall where animals were kept. There was no person in Bethlehem aware of the significance of that night, but the news of the Savior's birth would not be silent for long. And with just about everything with Jesus, the conventional way of doing things is turned upside down. One would think that the prominent religious leaders, the high priest, the Sanhedrin, and leaders of the various Jewish sects would have been informed first. Instead, God reveals the amazing truth to *shepherds*.

Shepherds were basically at the bottom of the Jewish social and religious ladder. Tending to sheep required the commitment of seven days a week, thereby forcing shepherds to skip out on the required Sabbath regulations made up by the Pharisees. Therefore, they were in continual violation of the religious law of the day and were regarded as ceremonially unclean. Socially, they met with rejection because of their lack of formal education and lack of work in the skilled trades. In some circles of the

Jewish culture shepherds were looked down upon as being dishonest, unreliable, and unsavory. By the end of the first century were no longer allowed to testify in court.<sup>14</sup>

Lowly, humble people like shepherds would have never been the ones expected to receive such significant news. Yet, it is those of low status that Jesus has often appealed to, Luke 1.52; 1 Corinthians 1.26. Instead of casting them off, Christ *exalted the lowly*. Jesus' ministry was not directed at those who felt they had arrived and needed nothing. Instead, He looked for the poor, lowly, afflicted, and outcasts of society. Those were the broken ones, mired in their sin and humble enough to turn to God as the only solution.

Luke tells us these shepherds were out in the fields with their flocks. In the middle of the night an angel of the Lord appeared. The sudden arrival of the angel terrified them, 2.9. The angel proclaimed:

But the angel said to them, "Don't be afraid, for look, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people: Today in the city of David a Savior was born for you, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be the sign for you: You will find a baby wrapped tightly in cloth and lying in a manger," Luke 2.10-12.

Some important things to observe about the angel's proclamation:

- Salvation will be for *all the people*.
- Jesus was born in the city of David, i.e., Bethlehem.
- Jesus was born *for them*. He is the Savior of all who believe.
- Jesus is a Savior, a rescuer. He came to save us from our sin, Matthew 1.21; Luke 19.10
- Jesus is the Messiah, God's anointed.
- Jesus is the Lord, referred to by a title reserved for deity.

Think of the terms just used to describe Jesus: Savior, Messiah, and Lord. And now imagine the Creator Himself being born in an animal trough. The contrast could not be more vivid.

Let's not pass over 2.13-14:

Suddenly there was a multitude of the heavenly host with the angel, praising God and saying: Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace on earth to people he favors!

Can you imagine this! What must it have sounded like? There is no other Scripture pointing to the arrival of this many angels at once! See them praising God ... a foretaste of heaven!

### ***The Shepherds' Response***

There was no delay. They took the shortest and most direct route to Bethlehem and did so *in a hurry*, 2.16. When they arrive, they found Mary and Joseph, and the Baby ... just as the angels said ... lying in the manger. They weren't silent about who they found ... all who heard were simply amazed at what the shepherds told them, 2.18. After they returned to the pastures, they *glorified and praised God for all the things they had seen and heard, which were just as they had been told*, 2.20.

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<sup>14</sup> MacArthur, John F., Jr. *Luke 1–5*. MacArthur New Testament Commentary. Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2009, p. 155.

These men had the type of hearts that were receptive to divine instruction. They didn't miss Jesus.

## Simeon

Simeon's story is recorded in Luke 2.25-35. This is the only place in Scripture that we read about him. It appears he was advanced in age, 2.26, 29, and is described as a *righteous and devout* person. "Righteous" describes his status before God and "devout" reveals his attitude of reverence toward God. Simeon would have viewed his life as being an example for others.

Simeon was *looking forward to Israel's consolation*, 2.25b. "Consolation" carries along the meaning of "comfort," "encouragement," or "solace." Certainly, a person like Simeon would have yearned for national deliverance from the occupation of the Romans. But for the spiritually minded person in tune with the writings of the Old Testament, the hungering for a Messiah focused on higher, nobler things. Passages like Jeremiah 31.31-34 would not have been missed inside the heart of a spiritually minded Jew. Isaiah spoke often of the comfort the Messiah would bring, Isaiah 40.1-13; 51.3,12; 61.1-2; 66.10-13.

Luke also tells us that Simeon had the Holy Spirit. The gift of the Holy Spirit for the purpose of God speaking through men was not uncommon during Old Testament times. Bezalel, Moses, Othniel, Jephthah, Samson, David, Azariah, Jahaziel, Micah, and Zechariah are all said to have been given the Holy Spirit.<sup>15</sup> As for Simeon, he had been told by the Spirit that he would not die until he got to see the Messiah.

When Joseph and Mary went to the temple to carry out some of the customary expectations under the law, the Spirit directed Simeon to the temple. When Simeon saw the baby Jesus he leaped out in praise:

Now, Master, you can dismiss your servant in peace, as you promised. For my eyes have seen your salvation. You have prepared it in the presence of all peoples—a light for revelation to the Gentiles and glory to your people Israel, Luke 2.29-32.

Simeon got it. See how he connects Jesus to *salvation*. See how he connects that salvation to *all peoples*. Notice how he refers to Jesus as a *light of revelation for the Gentiles*. By revelation of the Spirit, he understood that Jesus wasn't coming just for the deliverance of the Jews, but for all the people in the world. It was Isaiah who said:

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; a light has dawned on those living in the land of darkness, Isaiah 9.2.

Jesus was coming to end the reign of sin and death for all men.

Next, Simeon gives the amazed parents of the young Boy a warning. Speaking directly to Mary he says:

Indeed, this child is destined to cause the fall and rise of many in Israel and to be a sign that will be opposed – and a sword will pierce your own soul – that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed, Luke 2.34-35.

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<sup>15</sup> See Exodus 31.2-3; Numbers 11.25; 27.18; Judges 3.9-10; 11.29; 13.24-25; 14.6, 19; 15.14; 1 Samuel 16.13; 2 Chronicles 15.1; 20.14-17; 24.20; Micah 3.8; Zechariah 7.12.

How people would respond to Jesus would determine their destiny. Many would fall over Him, Isaiah 8.13-15. Others would choose to believe. Jesus would also meet with stiff opposition that would lead to His brutal death. Israel would ultimately reject Him revealing the hearts of many completely exposed.

## Anna

Anna was a prophetess who had been married for seven years and then widowed. Some translations read that she had reached the age of 84, which would have meant she had been a widow for over 60 years. Other translations say she had been a widow for 84 years which would have put her around 100 years old or more! No matter which translation is correct, she was very old. She dedicated her entire life to temple service. As Simeon, Joseph, and Mary are gathered, along with the baby, Anna walked up.

Here, verse 38 reveals what was on her heart. It is obviously the Messiah.

- She gave thanks to God.
- She testified about what she had seen.
- She testified to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

She, along with others were waiting for the Messiah to come. This reminds us of Malachi's prophecy. Note how the Old Testament closes with the promise of the dawning of the Messianic day:

The sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings, and you will go out and playfully jump like calves from the stall, Malachi 4.2.

The Messiah was coming like the sun comes up at dawn, bringing the warmth of its light across the earth. The shepherds, Simeon, Anna, and countless others *got it*. The time of fulfillment was at hand.