

**THE RIGHT PLACE, THE RIGHT TIME****~Other Speakers G-L: Allan Halton:**

Here is a young man walking along a dusty road with sure but urgent step. He is leading a donkey upon which a very pregnant young woman is riding.

This young woman so obvious with child could give birth at any moment: why then are they travelling in the first place?

It's because a prophet seven hundred and fifty years earlier had written, "But thou, Bethlehem Ephrata, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall He come forth unto Me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting (from the days of eternity)" (Micah 5.2).

That is why this young couple have undertaken a journey of a hundred kilometres—it will take them three or four days—from Nazareth to a little town in Judea called Bethlehem. Something very wondrous is unfolding, and this young couple are part of its unfolding.

Now, the young man and his wife did know that the little one she was carrying was this promised Messiah king—the Son of God. An angel had revealed this to them. However, it does not appear that they somehow discovered Micah's prophecy at the last minute, and were rushing from Nazareth to Bethlehem so the prophecy could be properly fulfilled.

The immediate reason they were on the road to Bethlehem was because Caesar Augustus, ruler of the Roman Empire—at that time the whole known world—had issued a decree that a census was to be taken, and all the inhabitants of the world were to register forthwith in their places of birth.

Since the young man leading the donkey was "of the house and lineage of David," he was returning to Bethlehem, "the city of David," to comply with Caesar's decree.

Why was Caesar Augustus calling for the census? Whatever his own reason was, as high above that as the heavens are above the earth a Sovereign God was working an eternal purpose, and He needed a young woman about to have a baby in the right place at the right time, thus to fulfill an ancient prophecy.

Here is even more wonder to add to all this wonder. In a land far from the land this couple lived in, and at the same time the young woman was about to give birth, those who watched the stars and knew their talk observed a new phenomenon in the night sky. A certain star of singular note appeared in the sky. There's been a lot of speculation as to what this star was, but God, it seems, has not felt the need to give us an explanation, leaving this among the Bible's other mysteries. So I am content to leave it there as well. Whatever the star was, its appearance was something very momentous, something speaking loud and clear to these men of old. All the stars had been set in the heavens—who knows when. From the beginning. But at a certain point in history this star appeared in the sky at a very specific place among the constellations. It's intriguing, isn't it, that the star watchers understood that the heavenly sign spoke of the birth of a very great king. They also determined, somehow, that the king was a king of the Jews.

Are we sceptical that these ancient stargazers could derive so much understanding from the stars? But David tells us that, "The heavens declare the glory of the LORD, and the firmament sheweth His handiwork. Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night sheweth knowledge" (Ps. 19.1). It is all there in the heavens for the hearing ear to hear and the seeing eye to see, even the story of God's handiwork—among all His works His cherished special project. These men—our Bible calls them magi—could read that story. They understood that language.

In fact they also understood—how, I know not—that the kingdom of this king about to be born included themselves. For after seeing His star they set out on a quest to find him and worship him.

And where else would a new king of the Jews be born but in the palace at Jerusalem? But no, after inquiring in Jerusalem, the men were directed to a little town about ten kilometres distance. Perhaps they felt uneasy now. Were they being put off? But when they finally drew near the little town, there it was again—the star they had earlier seen in the east! This filled them with great joy. What assurance! God, it seems, knew these men, and loved them. For, "the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was" (Matt. 2.10, NKJV).

We are not told when these men from the East had set out on their journey, but by the time they finally arrived in Bethlehem many months had passed. The child was no longer in the manger, but in a house now. “And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary His mother, and fell down, and worshipped Him.”

I find all this completely mesmerizing. With infinite power and unmatched wisdom, a sovereign God creates the stars in the heavens, arranging them with such precision that they shall be at a certain place in the sky at a certain predetermined point in time according to a great eternal purpose He has in mind. The millennia pass, the time arrives, and a certain ancient star appears among the constellations—at the right place, and at the right time—coinciding with and announcing the birth of a very Great King. This same sovereign God is no less sovereign in His workings when a man who has named himself Augustus Caesar—the great, the majestic, the august Caesar—in his own estimation the ruler of the whole world, arranges for a census of his world, which means that a certain young man and a woman with child must make their way down to a little town in Judea where an ancient prophecy is about to be fulfilled.

As one who lives a very ordinary and unnotable life I find this all very inspiring. For I know that the same God who worked so majestically and so sovereignly back then, both in the height of heaven and on earth among the lowly... He is not yet finished His wondrous sovereign workings. For He has not yet fully unfolded His great eternal plan. He is not finished yet. There is more that He intends to unfold, to the praise of His glory. Much more. And so as one who loves His glory, and greatly desires to figure in the eternal purposes of God—yet at the same time feels small and very insignificant in the grand scheme of things—what hope I have! I look back to that day of Bethlehem, and oh, how greatly He was magnified in the small... back then.

But I remember that He is the same God yesterday, today, and forever. Let every unbelieving thought be dismissed from my heart, then. The same God who wrought so sovereignly in days of old is still at work. He continues to unfold His great eternal purpose. And, as the apostle Paul assures us, it is a purpose you and I whom He has predestined have a part in! There are things yet unfulfilled, beloved Christian, in this wondrous purpose of God which He purposed away back in the days of eternity. He will be no less sovereign in fulfilling them than He was in the ancient day when He set the stars in the heavens, no less sovereign than in the day when a decree went forth, and, nine months pregnant or not, a young couple had to go down to Bethlehem... and the Christ was born.

“...In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of Him who worketh all things after the counsel of His own will, That we should be to the praise of His glory who first trusted in Christ” (Eph. 1.11).

What a compelling verse! The same God who wrought so sovereignly in days of old is still at work, sovereignly working all things after the counsel of His own will. To what end? That we should be to the praise of His glory who have put our hope in Christ.

How precious a hope, and how humbling—that ordinary people such as you and I who love the Lord with all our hearts have a part in something so great—our Lord Jesus Christ being glorified in the earth. It is going to happen. As God is sovereign, this is going to happen. And so let us go about our ordinary lives as that young couple back then went about their lives—trusting in their God, and... expectantly. Though ordinary people, and lowly, they knew they had been included in something very wondrous, and very high. The same sovereign God is still at work. As we, too, acknowledge Him in all our ways we have the assurance, if not always the awareness, that in the everyday things of ordinary life He is leading us in a wondrous sovereign plan. We too shall be in the right place at the right time.