

We Four Kings

Isaiah 9:2-7 | Psalm 96 | Titus 2:11-14 | Luke 2:1-20

LUKE 2:1-20

¹ In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ² This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³ All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴ Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵ He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶ While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷ And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. ⁸ In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹ to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ¹⁴ 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!' ¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.' ¹⁶ So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

1. A FIRST KING

Once upon a time, long ago, the world was changing. The age of the judges was passing. Giants roamed the earth. But the hearts of men, the people of God, grew restless. They grew dissatisfied. And in the darkest of moments, they chose to reject God and appoint for themselves a human king.¹ And so, there was a king in the land. A king of the people of God, taller and more handsome than any other—a king, appointed to lead the armies of God's people against their enemies. But little did they know, an evil darkness was overtaking this king, rotting his heart, corrupting his mind. He became crazed, violent, selfish, evil, depraved to the point that God must intervene. The restless people, though disobedient, were still loved by God. And so, intervene God did.

2. A SECOND KING

In the countryside, near a small town, was a young boy. The seventh son of his father, he was a poet, and a keeper of sheep. God instructed his prophet, an aged man who still heard the voice of God, to visit this boy's family. After looking over his brothers, the prophet asked that the boy be brought in. And it was at this moment that God revealed to the prophet that this boy would rise and replace the evil king in the land.²

¹ 1 Sam 8:1 – 10:27.

² 1 Sam 16:1-13.

But it was many years, many turbulent, difficult years. First in the service of the depraved king, and then on the run from him—for the depraved king feared this boy would usurp his throne. But God’s favour rested on the boy as he fled, hiding, surviving.³ Eventually the evil king died by his own sword, and the boy rose up and took his place.⁴ He reigned forty years over God’s people, no longer a boy, but a man blessed by God.⁵ And yet, even this blessed king was not perfect. While he was a man after God’s own heart, he was not God. He was not capable of providing the redemption, the salvation that God’s restless people still needed. And so, God made this good king a promise, a promise that one day another king would arise from his line, a distant son, who could save his people. And this son would also be God’s own son. This king to come would establish an everlasting kingdom, sitting on the throne forever, and redeeming God’s people once and for all.⁶ This promise was so known, so anticipated, that the town this king was from, back in his days of being a shepherd boy, would bear his name. The town, Bethlehem, would be known as the City of David, the shepherd king who was given this glorious promise of salvation for all God’s people.

But this promised son did not come immediately. The ages passed slowly. God’s people remained restless and disobedient. Darkness remained in the land. Four hundred years later, another prophet was reminded of the promise, by then, a faint memory. Even while the people faced the destructive consequences of their disobedience, exile from their land and from their God, the prophet reminded them of their hope: *“For a child has been born for us, a son given to us... and he is named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God... His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom.”*⁷

Yet, even then, the promised king was not born. The great city burned. God’s people were taken into slavery in the east.⁸ And hope faded. The hope of this promised king was but a glimmer of light, flickering only faintly in the overwhelming darkness. Another four hundred years passed. Five hundred. Six hundred.

3. A THIRD KING

The land passed from the hands of the Babylonians to the Persians, then to the Greeks, and finally to the Romans. The hope of the everlasting king who would redeem God’s people was but a soft echo from centuries past in the chaos of the Roman world. Yet, a few remained hopeful, among them a lowly priest named Zechariah. As God stirred now to keep his promise, Zechariah confidently proclaimed: *“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favourably on his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a mighty saviour for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old...”*⁹ The time had arrived. Zechariah knew it. His hope was about to be realised. The promised king was to be born.

And a king was born. This king commanded the government, just as the prophecy had promised. The people of the world recognized this king. He was a man of influence, who

³ 1 Sam 16:14 – 30:31.

⁴ 1 Sam 31:1-13.

⁵ 1 Kgs 2:11.

⁶ 2 Sam 7:1-17.

⁷ Isa 9:6-7.

⁸ See Lamentations 1-5.

⁹ Luke 1:68-70.

commanded the whole earth with his words and conformed them to his will. It's even built into his many titles.¹⁰ But of his many titles, he became known particularly by one of great significance—a name that means divine, revered, god.¹¹ Indeed, he was seen not just a wise and powerful man, but as a god.¹² He was a divine king. But he was more than even that. He was a saviour. An inscription in a distant city, but from this era, a title recognizing his vast significance, words cut into stone, recognized him as the “saviour of the whole world.”¹³ The promises rang loudly now. The king was here. And his name, the name by which the world knew him, was this: Caesar Augustus.

But as powerful as he was, Caesar Augustus was not the saviour promised by God. He was an important man, born to an old and wealthy Roman family, the great-nephew of a previous king, Julius Caesar. But he grasped at power, taking as much control as he could, expanding the empire through violence and greed. God's people did not flourish under his rule. They were not saved because he was not he promised king, the promised redeemer, the hope of Israel, the son of David.

4. A FOURTH KING

And so, our story turns to an unexpected place. We find ourselves still in the Roman world of Caesar Augustus, but in that rural, little town, Bethlehem, the city of David. Joseph, a man in the lineage of the house of David, has reported there for the required census. With him was Mary, his betrothed. Together they arrived, in possession of very little except a promise, the promise that had been carried by many, but believed by few. The promise rested on Mary's heart especially, as it had been disclosed to her that she was to give birth. Indeed, she was told: “*And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David.*”¹⁴

Jesus was born: a human child, amongst the lowest of men, born in a barn, placed in a trough, a peasant, a human amongst mortals. The promised king did not come in glory. He was a commoner, lower than a commoner. And the first witnesses to the birth of this king were not royal courtiers. It was not the nobility of the house of Caesar. It was shepherds. The first to hear of this birth were the men of the land, just like his ancestor David, watching over the same fields as that great king. Jesus was a king from among the people.

And yet, he was also God, the one who was and is and is to come, the one who was before the foundations of the earth, the creator and redeemer, who was not just announced among those who tend the sheep, but heralded by the angelic host in the sky with fanfare. “*Glory to God in*

¹⁰ He had several fitting names, including *princeps senatus*—head of state, *pontifex maximus*—chief priest of the local religion, and *consular imperium*—chief executive.

¹¹ Through a decision of the senate on January 16, 27 BCE, Gaius Octavius was given the name that Luke uses: Augustus. See F.J. Haverfield, “The Name Augustus,” *Journal of Roman Studies*, 5 (1915), 249-250.

¹² John Buchan, *Augustus* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1937), 346, as cited in R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: That You May Know the Truth (Preaching the Word)*; Wheaton: Crossway, 1998).

¹³ Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (Garden City: Image/Doubleday, 1979), 415, and especially note 21, as cited in R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: That You May Know the Truth (Preaching the Word)*; Wheaton: Crossway, 1998).

¹⁴ Luke 1:31-32

the highest heaven," they proclaimed.¹⁵ For the saviour had been born. The ages of darkness could now pass. Bright light had entered into the black sky. Hope was now fulfilled in the fulness of time. This simple, gritty, filthy, smelly, birth was how God chose to enter the world. The fully divine—the one true God, not some earthly king who thinks he's a god—the creator and ruler of the universe, became a crying, pain-feeling, flesh and blood, baby boy. This is not Caesar, man made god, but Jesus Christ, God made man. The promised king, the Son of David, the one who could redeem his restless, disobedient people—he was born that night.

CONCLUSION

Four stories of four kings. You see, Christmas is not just the story of a baby born in a stable, but the fulfilment of God's greatest promise, his promise to save his restless, disobedient people. From ages past to our restless present, our hope is found in this story. For that baby boy, born in a stable, would later hang on a tree, giving his life for all God's people, and rise again from the dead, that we may live forever with him. And so, as we sit in the darkness of this night, may we turn our hope to the light of that night, that night so many centuries ago, that the promised king arrived, and our hope of redemption was born.

Let me pray: *Heavenly Father, help us to believe, to hope in the redemption found in your Son, our king. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

¹⁵ Luke 2:14.