

The Birth of Jesus Christ, Part 2

Luke 2:4-7

November 15, 2015

We are in Luke Chapter 2 this morning, so you can open your Bibles to Luke Chapter 2. Last week we entered into the nativity story, just breaking ground there, looking at the entrance of Jesus Christ into the world as a newborn baby. And that involved, I'll admit, a bit of a history lesson. I had to take you back to the times of Caesar Augustus, back to the time of Quirinius as he was operating in the area, and that involved a lot of information. I understand that. I don't apologize because Luke wrote it and the Holy Spirit wanted you to hear it. So, as we saw, our Lord was born in a time of great turmoil in Judea and Judah, that whole area. The long shadow of Rome reached into the land of Israel and was mediated through a brutal, maniacal administration of Herod the Great. And as he was nearing the end of his life, he was getting worse and worse. It was a time of tumult, a time of social and political anxiety, a sense of foreboding around Herod's kingdom, a sense of churning in the

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air, a time of nagging doubt, grim uncertainty. And as we emphasized last week, it was really a time ordained by God. We can't forget that. In the midst of all the chaos, God was still ruling. He was still reigning as sovereign. He was still directing everything according to his good and wise providence. He was sovereign over King Herod. He was sovereign over Quirinius, directing all of his affairs. He was sovereign over Caesar Augustus. He had put them in those places of leadership and authority for this time in world history to accomplish his purposes, namely, bringing his son, the Savior, into the world.

And as God directed all those things globally and regionally, let's not forget that he was also paying careful attention to the individual affairs of his people, which is what we're going to see this morning. His son, Jesus Christ, his parents, Joseph and his betrothed, the Virgin Mary. God never forgets about the individual. He's always concerned about people and their problems, even while he manages great world events, even as he raises and demolishes empires, even as he fulfills prophecy, while he's keeping galaxies spinning through the universe, stars in their places, orbits all on track, he's careful and concerned about us. I love how Jesus put it Luke

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12:6 and 7. He says, "Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten before God. In fact, even the hairs on your head are all numbered. Do not be afraid; you are more valuable than many sparrows." That's something we need to remember, isn't it? Especially in these turbulent, changing times.

No doubt you've seen news reports this weekend of the terrorist attacks in Paris, France, Friday evening. Coordinated attacks, multiple assailants, six locations throughout metro Paris, restaurants, bars were attacked, the Stade de France national stadium, the Bataclan concert hall. All those places attacked. Bombs, suicide vests, automatic weapons, executions-style killings, 129 dead, more than 350 injured. France's president, François Hollande, declared a state of emergency in France, complete with closed borders, curfews, troop deployments, something that hasn't been necessary since 1944, since World War II. Muslim terrorists took advantage of Europe's suicidal commitment to liberalism and to multiculturalism, and that's the result of Europe abandoning its Christian heritage. Muslims have stepped into the secular vacuum in Europe and radicalized Europe's immigrant population, either recruiting

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them for the ISIS battlefields or inciting them to aggression and rebellion right within their own cities, within Europe's most populated cities. Whole quarters in Paris, places in France, places in Germany, places in London, whole quarters are now under Sharia Law, not under the law of the land. There's a sense in which Friday's attacks were inevitable. No one should be surprised. Any country that follows Europe's path of secularization is going to find itself an easy target for Islamism fundamentalism. And our own citizens in our country have been following that path, committed to eroding and deconstructing the moral foundations of our country's strength and unrelenting pursuit of erotic liberty. And as those foundations crumble, we shouldn't be surprised to find further violence and bloodshed even in our own time, in our own country.

And yet beloved, we're reminded as we read about similar times right here in the New Testament. In this story about Jesus Christ being born into the world in violent times, God remains on the throne. He governs human affairs now as he always has, whether globally, regionally, or individually. His sovereign hand is guiding all things by his good and wise providence. And that's what we find right here again in our passage this

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morning. God is active in and through human decisions, whether it's the decree of an emperor, the administration of a regional official, or the individual decisions of a young married couple. Divine providence works through our day-to-day actions, our reactions, our decisions, our activities, all that to accomplish God's sovereign ends.

You'll see in your bulletin, I've put a couple of outline points there, a couple of hooks you can hang your thoughts on as you take notes. For as you can see from the points, we're going to see God's strategic and practical provision for his son Jesus Christ. But as we move through these verses and cover those points, what I want to highlight, that there are very human decisions that Joseph and Mary had to make as they navigated through the changing circumstances and the demands of their own world. You can't miss the fact that they are a very normal young couple. They're no different than you and me. As you'll see, they make their decisions, they live their lives; as they do that, God is doing his work. God is accomplishing his work. They don't force anything. They're not trying to make things happen. They're pursuing righteousness before whatever is presented to them. But God is leading them down the path that he's laid out for them. As

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they make their decisions, God does the rest. In this case, the result of their decisions is the birth of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior right at the time he was supposed to be born, right in the location he was supposed to be born. Only God could arrange all of that.

Let's begin just by reading the passage. We're just going to read the short section from verses 1 to 7. "In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor." Or he was governing in Syria, as we mentioned last time. And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to 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, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in the swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn."

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Our first point is going to cover verses 3 to 5, and as you can see there, it's God's strategic provision for Jesus. His strategic provision. And again, don't miss how God's provision involved the free decisions of Joseph, as Joseph navigated, brought his family, really, through a changing set of circumstances. This is the stuff of human life. This is what we all live through. This is what we all face. We make decisions every day, planning and acting and then reacting as we respond to new information, as we respond to changing circumstances and situations. Whether it's something that's dramatic, like the results of a terrorist attack; 9-11 changed everything in this county. You can't travel the same anymore. It changed how we do business. It changed our security. It changed everything. Whether it's something dramatic like that or something more steady, as it's been going on in this country, a cultural revolution that's been going on since the 50's and 60's. And move our country away from its foundation or something political, like registering for taxes.

Through it all, God directs us as well. He provides strategically to lead us in his perfect way. And as we pointed out last week, Luke starts with the global scene. He looks at

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the ambitions of the very first Roman Emperor. Luke 2:1, "In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered." "Those days," as we said, were the days of Herod the Great, really the end of his days. Caesar Augustus issued an imperial decree to gather census data, to register people for taxation. He was wise and effective in his administration. And because of that, it ushered in what we call the Pax Romana, a time of unprecedented peace. He intended to maintain the stability in the Empire, to maintain that Pax Romana, the Roman Peace. And that required money, that required funds and that's the reason for the census. People throughout the empire in the provinces, the client states, they were required to register for tax assessment. The Empire levied taxes from its non-Roman citizens, a poll tax, a tax on property. So Caesar Augustus decreed this census in 8 BC and he oversaw, as we mentioned, that one personally. He commissioned high-ranking consular officials throughout the Empire to conduct that registration, levy the taxes, then collect. We said Quirinius was one of those men. The decree in 8 BC had a ripple effect around the Empire, rolling through the Empire at varying rates of speed throughout the provinces, depending on the regional situation.

And that's why Luke provides this additional time marker, which is kind of like a parenthesis there in verse 2 in the narrative to help the reader locate that imperial census that affected this region. Luke 2:2, "This is the first registration when Quirinius was governing in Syria." Took good three to four years from 8 BC to start taking effect in Judea. It probably slowed down, no doubt, by the customs of the Jews. As we noted last time, translating this verse to give the impression that Quirinius was actually the governor of Syria at the time is a bit misleading because that's not what the grammar says there. Quirinius exercised governing authority, consular authority, governing power, which is really a more accurate understanding of the verb that is used there. He wasn't the governor, but he was still a very important high-ranking official and, as we said, commissioned by Caesar himself.

There's an inscription that was found in Turkey 1764, where it mentions Quirinius, where he actually exercising authority first in that region in Asia Minor and Turkey. And this inscription, called the Lapis Venetus, or the Inscription of Aemilius, after the man named in the inscription, this inscription gives testament, names Quirinius. Man named Quintus

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Aemilius was sent by Quirinius to conduct a census in the area of southern Syria. That was immediately north of Nazareth, where Mary grew up, she could have thrown a stone up to that area. Immediately north, this man Quintus Aemilius he was sent by Quirinius to conduct a census there, to register, 117,000 citizens of the Apamean community. Quirinius sent another man, not just Aemilius up there in north of Nazareth, but also a man named Caponius to Palestine to do the very same thing. Josephus gives testament to that; that happened around 5 BC. Don't worry, none of this is going to be on the test. You don't have to write it all down.

But in 5 BC, right around the time of the census here in Luke 2:2. So as Quirinius and Aemilius conducted the censuses in Syria and the Apamean community and then in Palestine, among the Jews, people were registered in the Apamean community, and in Syria they were registered right where they lived. That was the typical Roman method, tax people where they lived, where they work. In Palestine it's different. Quirinius and Caponius took a different approach in Palestine. Since they administered that registration in cooperation with King Herod, they didn't conduct the census in the normal Roman way. They deferred to Herod's

tendency to accommodate Jewish customs. Wise approach. That meant for registration purposes, the Jews had to travel to the territory of their tribe to be registered, exactly as we see here.

In Joseph's case, verse 4, this meant he had to return to Bethlehem because he was of the tribe of Judah. It says there, look at it, "All went to be registered each to his own town and Joseph also went up from Galilee from the town of Nazareth to Judea to the City of David, which is called Bethlehem because he was of the house and lineage and David." So this census really provides the context of God's strategic provision for his son. It's the context this is essential to ensuring that the Messiah would be born in the City of David because God had a prophecy to fulfill. Micah 5:2, you're familiar with it, it says, "But you, O Bethlehem, Ephrathah," which by the way, there two Bethlehems in Israel at that time, one in the North near Galilee and this one in the South. Micah 5:2 specifies the southern Bethlehem. "You, Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler of Israel, whose coming forth is from old, from ancient

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days,” or you could translate that, “from eternity.” It’s really talking about the eternal Son of God coming on the earth.

God intended the City of David to be the birthplace of the Son of David. Why? Well, God need to get him in close proximity to the shepherds, but more on that next time. That’s a whole different sermon. So just wait for that. For now, it’s enough to note that God is working in every single detail. He is directing this young couple through his hidden hand of providence, sending them to this small, seemingly insignificant town in the eyes of the world, but very important, prophetically speaking, very important for his plan. As a righteous young man, Joseph had every intention to submit to the will of Rome. We mentioned last time, rebellion was in the air in Judea. Rabbis of the Pharisee party, men like Judas the Galilean and Matthias, they were stirring the people up. They were teaching people in the Law of Moses that righteousness meant opposing Rome, opposing Herod. It’s not hard to sympathize with that approach, that viewpoint, is it? Especially for us as evangelical Christians as we watch our country being dismantled by the governing authorities. Not only would submitting to the Roman census lead to a diminishment of personal wealth, further weakening all the Jewish people,

worse than that, their tax money was funding the Roman occupation. They were effectively paying to keep the Roman legions in place. They were funding the government that oppressed them. Not only that, but their tax money funded false religion, built temples for Roman idols, furthered Roman licentiousness.

As I said, today's evangelicals can easily understand that and sympathize with the teachings of Judas the Galilean. In fact, in some corners of evangelicalism, I hear the same arguments being made. Same arguments. We should remember Judas fomented rebellion, and he paid the price for it. Rome didn't bear the sword in vain, or light them on fire in vain, as Herod did.

Joseph, he wasn't concerned about any of that. In his pursuit of righteousness, he intended to obey the government. He intended to obey quietly, peacefully, to do what was required. His duty before God was to submit to the government. He left Rome to answer to God for what it did with his tax money. Taking a trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem would be, for Joseph,

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inconvenient to say the least. It was 80 miles one way. It was winter time. Joseph had a pregnant wife to consider. It's not like he could take a day off from work, zip down to Bethlehem in a car, register and come back and make it a day trip. The journey for him would take four or five days on foot one way. And as a carpenter, taking a couple weeks off of work, it's not like he had stored up a bunch of vacation time or something like that to burn. For him, not working meant not eating. Still, Joseph fully intended to make the necessary arrangements to make the inconvenient trip to register himself.

A question comes up at this point, as you read through the narrative, and it's a significant question. We understand why Joseph wanted to do what he did. But what motivated Joseph to bring Mary along with him on his trip to Bethlehem? Mary was pregnant, verse 5. So why risk the trip? Why not leave her in the hands of family? Why not take the trip by himself, go down there to Bethlehem and come back in time for the birth. As far as we can tell, there was nothing legally that required Mary to be registered for taxation purposes, just Joseph. Even if it were required for her to register for that poll tax, which women, by the way, did pay, Joseph could have registered for

both of them. So, why bring her along? Especially with child. Some say that Mary may have owned property in Bethlehem, and so she went back to register as a property owner. That seems a bit of a stretch to me especially since their first offering in the temple, verse 24, was a pair of turtle doves or two young pigeons, which that's the poverty stricken offering. That's the offering that people would pay if they had nothing else to give. Not property owners. Others suggest that Joseph and Mary they knew Micah's prophecy so they were kind of theologically motivated, Micah 5:2, to get down there to Bethlehem to participate in the fulfillment of that prophecy. That's possible, but even that seems unlikely.

It's impossible to go back 2,000 years, get inside their heads, but two things are significant to me about this text in Micah 5:2. First of all, Luke doesn't mention Micah's prophecy in the text at all. I brought that out. Matthew brings it out in his Gospel. Luke is silent about it. He had access to all the written records of Jesus' family in doing all of his research, which he mentions in the first four verses of his Gospel. A reference to Micah 5:2 doesn't register here though, especially when it would be so natural to show up in the narrative, explain

why they went. Secondly, what does register here is what Mary had just heard at the house of Zechariah and Elizabeth.

We're just a few weeks back from Luke Chapter 1 and those final verses there. Mary had heard Zechariah's prophecy. Light shining on those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death. And as familiar as Mary was with Scripture, we've mentioned that before, she would have associated those words of Zechariah's prophecy with Isaiah's prophecy. Isaiah 9:1 and 2, "There will be no gloom for her who is in anguish. In the former times he bought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali," Where Nazareth is located, by the way, "but in the latter time he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them light has shone." That would have immediately come to her mind. And as I said, the Gospel writer Matthew picks up on the significance of that prophecy noting the fulfillment there in Matthew 4:14 to 16. So it's quite likely that if Joseph and Mary were thinking theologically, and they were, by the way, they're thinking biblically, they would have expected Jesus to be born right there in Nazareth, not down in

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Bethlehem. Leaving Nazareth especially with her in the second or third trimester of her pregnancy, probably not in their original thinking, probably not in their original plan.

So we're back to that question: What motivated Joseph to take Mary out of Nazareth, away from her family, and bring her to Bethlehem in time to deliver the baby there in Bethlehem? Theology probably didn't play a factor. Legal requirement probably didn't play a factor. Securing Mary's property probably not in the equation either. In fact, in some ways it might seem best for Joseph to leave Mary behind, get that trip done and over with, get back in time to paint the nursery, right? The answer is hinted at in verse 5 at the end. Notice the final phrase there. "Joseph went up from Galilee from the town of Nazareth to 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, who was," with what? "with child." That was the motivating factor right there. She's with child. Mary's with child. But get this, not by Joseph.

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During the betrothal, the revelation of her pregnancy as she started to show would start to generate some pretty uncomfortable questions in the little village of Nazareth. I've been somewhat surprised, maybe mildly amused as I've moved from Los Angeles, 20 million some people or whatever in the whole metro area and moving here to Greeley and I find people who know things about me I had no idea. Where I get my hair cut; they know all my family. The girl that sits and cuts my hair says, "Hey, how's your father-in-law doing?" I'm like I didn't even know about my father-in-law. How'd you know that? Things just get around here in this town. Some of it is just gossip, isn't it? Sinful. But not everything. But certainly, something like this in Nazareth, much, much smaller than Greeley, by the way. This would get around. But God-ordained census of Caesar Augustus now rolling through the area through Quirinius' authority, this gave Joseph and Mary the perfect opportunity to get out of town.

To get a little more insight to how this all went down, turn over to Matthew's Gospel for a moment. Matthew's gospel, and look at chapter 1, verse 18. Matthew and Luke both tell the Nativity story. Each of them from a different angle, slightly

different angle. But there's a significant piece of information in the narrative that Matthew gives us. Luke leaves it out because it wasn't essential to his purpose, but Matthew includes it. By harmonizing the two stories, as we do in the Gospel accounts, we get the fuller picture. But take a look there at Matthew 1:18, "Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit." Uh-oh, that's a problem for Joseph.

So verse 19, "Her husband Joseph, being a just man, unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly." You say, What's so just and merciful about divorcing Mary in her time of greatest need? Well, how was Joseph to understand this? How was he to understand Mary's confession that she's pregnant and that it's by the Holy Spirit? Okay, stretching the bounds of credibility there for him. He knows her character. He doesn't immediately suspect that she's done something sinful, but this is hard, very hard for him. Mary's pregnancy to him looked like a violation of their betrothal, which was, in those days, adultery, punishable in the Law of Moses by stoning. So, sympathize here with Joseph. He didn't know what to believe. So

he thought, divorce her quietly, break this betrothal. He could help her family deal with the pregnancy issue in some way, but he was in a very difficult situation.

Verse 20, "As he considered these things," no doubt sleeplessly wrestling in his bed, "behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream saying, 'Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: 'Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel' (which is God with us)."

So God solves this dilemma for Joseph. Sends an angel, visit him in a dream, verify Mary's story. That's so helpful, right? He's assured by the angel that the Holy Spirit has indeed, just as Mary said, has indeed caused her to conceive miraculously, thereby fulfilling, as the angel quotes there, Isaiah 7:14. Don't you love how God's revelation brings couples

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together? Doesn't drive them apart. You hear so many stories of one spouse or another getting some supposed word from God that sends them away from the marriage to pursue some fanciful ministry, ambition, or something like that. In these nativity stories, God's revelation brought Zechariah and Elizabeth together. It brought Joseph and Mary together. God's revelation, beloved, always unites. True revelation from God unites; it does not divide. When Joseph awoke, he's fully on board. He's all in. Verse 24, "When he woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife." The verb there in verse 24 is interesting; it's pretty strong. It's *paralambano*, to take to oneself, to take for oneself. Matthew's trying to tell us Joseph wasted no time here. He woke up and he married that girl right away.

When we compare these accounts here in Matthew and Luke, we can surmise that Mary, when she told Joseph about her pregnancy, she was probably about three months pregnant. You know, when she told about the angelic visit, when she told him about her pregnancy, the conception, all that kind of stuff. Remember, she had left right when she heard Gabriel's prophecy. She left immediately after that and visited Elizabeth, when Elizabeth was

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in her sixth month of pregnancy. Luke 1:36, 1:39 tells us that. And then she returned from Elizabeth's house after the birth of John the Baptist about three months later. So ladies, is the baby bump showing yet at three months? Not likely. Especially dressed like they were dressed, hidden underneath those long Middle Eastern robes, probably couldn't detect it. So when Mary returned from Elizabeth's house, she told Joseph everything that had happened, which sent Joseph into a tailspin. He was contemplating all of this when the angel of the Lord appeared to him and solved it completely. Joseph woke up, immediately ended the betrothal by entering into a public marriage. He took Mary into his home, but verse 25, Matthew chapter 1, "He knew her not until she had given birth to a son."

So Joseph was obedient to the angel of the Lord. He followed through with taking Mary into his home, that is that he married her in a public ceremony then took her into his home. That marriage ceremony that solemnized the marriage covenant publicly before God, before man, legitimized the marriage socially. Everybody in Nazareth was satisfied, but Joseph did not consummate the marriage until after Jesus was born. So Joseph and Mary legally married, legally allowed to consummate

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their marriage, released from the strictures of their betrothal. Everything was above board, but they didn't follow through with everything, did they? Before the Lord, the two were technically still in a state of betrothal, which is why Luke refers to Mary as his betrothed in verse 5, very accurate.

You can turn back to Luke 2:5, by the way. So why is this change in marital status significant? Why am I taking you through this? What's important about it? For one thing, Joseph was now able to mark Mary, filing jointly on her tax return, so that's always an exciting time for a young man. Very cool. But, more significantly and to our point here, if Joseph and Mary, if they were merely betrothed when they traveled south to Bethlehem, their traveling together would have been considered scandalous. The marriage ceremony saved that couple from public scandal. Their status now as a married couple, no longer betrothed, but now married in Nazareth, enabled Joseph and Mary to be able to travel together, for Joseph to take Mary with him to Bethlehem. The young couple needed to leave Nazareth before too long because Mary would be starting to show. The more her pregnancy was revealed, the more their nosy neighbors would start doing the math, calculating how long they'd been married,

figure out something was fishy here. Whatever inclination they may have had to stay in Nazareth, the Lord overcame that, didn't he, by his providence? God strategically caused several events to converge all at this point and expel the couple from Nazareth by their own free will, by their own desire. They wanted to leave. Joseph didn't dare leave Mary behind and expose her to public scorn and ridicule. Loving husband.

So as news of this census decreed by Caesar Augustus several years earlier, as the news reached Nazareth, as the agents of Quirinius influenced Herod to disseminate this registration instruction, this gave Joseph the opportunity that he needed to leave Nazareth with no suspicion at all. They were able to discretely leave town. Joseph was able to protect his wife's good reputation. So, in the midst of some very human circumstances, motivated by very human concerns, God worked out his will through the free exercise of Joseph's will. Joseph chose to submit to the government. He chose to care for his wife, and all that was exactly as the Lord had planned. In that way, God strategically provided for Jesus to be born in Bethlehem, the city of David, exactly as he prophesied and there's significance to that as well.

So Joseph and Mary, eager to get out of Nazareth before the signs of her pre-nuptial pregnancy are obvious, they start on their journey south to Bethlehem. Two basic routes they could have taken. The shortest route was directly from Nazareth, right across the valley below to their south, straight through Samaria following a trade route. It was also the most rugged route, not easy for a pregnant wife, and it also took them through the unpleasant land of the Samaritans. The longer route would have crossed through the mountains to Canaan to the East, descended to the southern shores of Galilee and from there, they would likely rendezvous with other travelers who were heading south as well because it was safer to travel in groups. Joseph would have prepared for all of this. Head south through the Jordan Rift Valley. That was the flattest route, easier going for Mary. It was a well-worn path frequented by travelers, less likely to fall victim to bandits along the way. Still, it's quite a journey.

The overall descent from Nazareth to Galilee was about 2,200 feet. And then the walk along the Jordan River wasn't bad, but then there was a significant ascent from the Dead Sea, which

is, by the way, 1,400 feet below sea level, imagine that, to go from there up to Jericho and then farther still to Jerusalem, which was perched at 2,300 feet. That's a total climb of 3,700 feet. People in the first century they were more robust than we are, used to walking long distances. No one needed a gym membership back then. But imagine, ladies, making that kind of a climb while pregnant. I'm just guessing that's not pleasant. Just a suspicion on my part because I've never had to do it, but the whole trip here would have taken nearly a week on foot. Maybe even longer. Camping on the ground. Exposed to the winter weather elements with its cool temperatures, likelihood probability of rain at least. Not the ideal time for a pregnant woman to go camping.

Alfred Edersheim paints the picture of their travel quite well. This is what he says, "Although passing through one of the warmest parts of the country, the season of the year must, even in, most favorable circumstances, have greatly increased the difficulties of such a journey. A sense of rest and peace must, almost unconsciously, have crept over the travelers when at last they reached the rich fields that surrounded the ancient 'House of Bread,'" which is the literal meaning of Bethlehem, House of

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Bread, "and passing through the valley, ascended through the terraced vineyards and gardens. Winter though it was, the green and silvery foliage of the olive might, even at that season, mingle with the pale pink of the almond, nature's early waker. And with the darker color of the opening peach buds, the chaste beauty and sweet quiet of the place would recall memories of Boaz, of Jesse, and of David. So with a sense of relief, the travelers would turn from the sight of Herod's castle perched at a high point there. Through the break of the hills eastward the heavy molten surface of the Dead Sea, the Sea of Judgment would appear in view; westward wound the road to Hebron; behind them lay the valleys and hills which separated Bethlehem from Jerusalem and concealed the Holy City. But for the present such thoughts," writes Edersheim, "would give way to the pressing necessity of finding shelter and rest."

Jerusalem and Bethlehem were only separated by six miles. That's the length of Greeley, right? And yet there were hills in between them. Having considered the strategic concerns, let's consider a second aspect of God's provision here. It's God's practical provision for Jesus. Down in Bethlehem, they're tucked away from some of the turmoil and chaos up there in Jerusalem.

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All the political things going on there. All the revolts, riots, unrest. God's caring for them. He's taking care of practical issues. It's not just about fulfilling prophecy, though it is that; it's about taking care of these people by caring for them. And this, by the way, in verses 6 to 7 is where the narrative turns quite dear, evoking all those images of gentleness and tenderness we've come to appreciate at the Christmas season as this new mother cares for her child.

Look at verses 6 and 7, "While they were there, the time came for her to give birth." No telling really how long they were there. I mean, if she went early on in the second trimester, through the third trimester, could've been there a month or so. We don't know. But it says, "The time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn." I don't know if you're like me, but I'm thinking, That's it? I want to know more. I mean, tell us all the details. Matthew is equally brief in just mentioning it happened. Let's move on. No trumpets, no parades, no fanfare. And as we mentioned earlier, Luke didn't even mention the prophetic fulfillment here. But the time had come.

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Galatians 4:4 says, "In the fullness of time God sent forth his son." Paul taught the theological significance of Jesus' birth. In fact, he spent a lot of time, in his epistles unpacking theological significances of everything that happened in Jesus' life. But it was Luke who laid down, provided us with the historical foundation, the facts upon which the theology rests. "While they were there, the time came for her to give birth and she gave birth to her first born son."

Just a footnote, the significance of Christianity is that it is not a myth. It's not make-believe. As someone has said, the story doesn't begin, "Once upon a time," but rather, "In those days." Christianity is grounded in real history. It involves real people, real places. It's intertwined with actual times, in fact, verifiable facts. Those who reject Christianity are rejecting reality. They're ignoring real history; they're denying the truth of how things actually happened. Folks, be confident in this story. This is how it happened. Whatever this Book says is how it is. And the one who fears the Lord will live their life according to it.

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Now, some look at that final phrase in verse 7 there, "There was no place for them in the inn." They look at that final phrase as evidence of the inhospitable environment there at Bethlehem. As if this is an indication of the cold indifference of the Jews right here at the beginning toward their Messiah. But that's not quite right. Quite a bit of ink has been spilled on the meaning of that word, inn. It's the Greek word *katalyma*, and it's actually a pretty broad word. It can mean, inn. It can mean, guest room, it can mean, dining room. When Jesus sent his disciples to go and rent the Upper Room, that's the word *katalyma* right there. It could mean, animal stall. I believe the concept of the guest room is probably right, here, not so much an inn, but a guest room. Joseph had relations in Bethlehem and so he arranged something. Good husband providing for his family, he arranges something. The commentator Alfred Plummer suggests that it's possible Joseph had relied upon the hospitality of some friend in Bethlehem, whose guest chamber, however, was already full when he and Mary arrived. It seems reasonable.

Joseph and Mary, arriving there, realizing the city has been swollen through the whole registration process going on in

the land, they have to make make-shift accommodations. Whoever they arranged with had to help them be accommodated.

It was the second century theologian Justin Martyr who influenced the picture we now have in our minds about the night of the Nativity. According to what he wrote, we've come to see the nativity scene as happening in kind of a cave, kind of outdoors, right? That's where a lot of those manger scenes are. Here's what he wrote that inspired that in the second century, "But when the child was born in Bethlehem since Joseph could not find a lodging in that village, he took up his quarters in a certain cave near the village. While they were there, Mary brought forth the Christ and placed him in a manger and here the Magi, who came from Arabia found him." Thanks to Justin, we now have the nativity scenes that put the holy family in a cave surrounded by animals, tended by shepherds and at the same time, visited by wise men. The wise men probably weren't there at that time, but that's another sermon for another time. He just got that detail wrong. So don't look back to the church fathers and say they're impeccable, they're absolutely without error. Nah, every now and again they blow it, just like we do.

But it's probably time to clarify some of these traditions and I think especially to exonerate Bethlehem's reputation as a cold, inhospitable town that would send a pregnant woman out into the cold. Commentator James Edwards, he paints a slightly warmer picture for us of Middle Eastern hospitality. Here's how he described the accommodations that Joseph and Mary would have found. This is what he says, "The footprint of a typical first century Palestine dwelling was a rectangle divided into three spaces: a large central room with a stable for animals on one end and a guest room, a katalyma, on the other. All three rooms normally had separate entrances and the katalyma was an attached guest room separated from the central room by a solid wall. The stable was separated from the central room by a half wall, thus allowing the family to feed animals without going outdoors. When Joseph and Mary arrived in Bethlehem, the guest rooms in homes were already occupied and hence, the newborn Jesus was swaddled and placed in a manger. The manger was within sight, sound and reach of the central room. Despite improvised arrangements, Middle Eastern hospitality then, as now, would have ensured that Mary, Joseph and Jesus were properly cared for." End quote.

From all I've read, I believe that's a pretty accurate picture, especially so when we consider the character and the kindness of God. The animal stall on the one side separated by a half wall from the central room was even better than the guest room if you think about it. It kept this young couple connected to the heart of that family and cared for in one of her most difficult times in her life, going through childbirth. God provided for the practical needs of Joseph and Mary. There's no need for us to burden them further with our imaginative traditions, okay? Mary gave birth to her firstborn son in a humble, but a relatively comfortable, private accommodation.

That word firstborn there it could be used in a theological sense. We've seen that in Colossians 1:5, 1:18, Psalm 2:7. It could be used in a theological sense to talk about preeminence, *prototokos*. Or it could be talked about in a sense of priority. Even though a younger son is next in the birth order, yet he's given preeminence or prominence, *prototokos* treated like the firstborn over his brothers. Genesis 48:13 to 20 talks about that, Exodus 4:22, Psalm 89, verse 27, it says the same thing about David, firstborn, even though he was the youngest. But here, the term isn't making a theological point. It's not

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talking just about preeminence. Though those things are true. Here the term is literal. It's referring to Jesus' literal birth order. He was, quite literally, Mary's firstborn son. And as the firstborn, the strong implication of that term is that Jesus had younger siblings. Matthew 1:25 says, "Joseph knew her not until she had given birth to a son." Implication: after the birth of Jesus, after her purification at the temple 40 days later recorded in verse 22 and following there, Joseph and Mary did the natural thing, they came together as husband and wife. They consummated their marriage. That's contrary, is it not, to Roman Catholic teaching? If Luke wanted to indicate that Jesus was the only child of Mary, he had a word for that. It was *monogenes*, only begotten. But he didn't use that word. He used the word first born, *prototokas*. And the Bible tells us plainly that Jesus did have younger brothers: Matthew 13, Luke 8, John 7. He also had younger sisters: Matthew 13, Mark 6. Jesus, though, was the firstborn.

As soon as Jesus was born, Mary's motherly instincts, hard-wired by God, kicked into gear. God, again, providing for Jesus in very practical ways as Mary does what mothers do. Two simple verbs indicate that in verse 7, "She swaddled her son and she

laid him in a manger." She wrapped him tightly and then she put him to bed. First indication of her care for her son. Some commentators have noted the clear parallel that exists there in the structure between Luke 2:7 and then a later passage, Luke 23:53, which links Jesus' birth here to his death. You can turn there, if you like, to see for yourself, but I can just tell you quickly, Luke 2:7 tells us that "Mary wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger." You know what Luke 23:53 says? "Joseph of Arimathea wrapped Jesus' body in a linen cloth and laid it in a tomb." In both cases, Jesus is dependent on the care of others. He can't care for his own body. Someone else is taking care of his body. And once again, here at Jesus' birth is yet another reminder about the nature of his mission on earth. It's foreshadowed. In the first instance, Jesus is laid in a manger, a newborn baby, a tender life, life ahead of him, growth ahead of him. In the second instance, it's only his body, lifeless and cold. This reminds us Jesus was born to die for our sins. Joel Green points out how later Christian iconography, you know what that is? It's talking about paintings of, you know, Mary and her son and those kinds of things, icons. Later Christian iconography recognized and capitalized on these connections we've just mentioned here, giving the birthplace of Jesus the semblance of a sepulture, a tomb. Even in the tender

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scene before us, we can never forget the purpose for which God made provision for his son, to purchase the forgiveness of our sins, to grant us eternal life.

But let's not get there yet. Let's enjoy this moment. Because Joseph and Mary here are cozy and comfortable. They're secluded in this stable attached to the home. As brand new parents, they're here rejoicing in this precious life, a truly priceless moment for them. Together they look at Jesus' perfectly formed fingers, play with them, you know, like parents do. Or especially grandparents do. Together they kiss his perfect cheeks; they wonder, like every parent, at a child, who like all children is fearfully and wonderfully made, woven together in all the intricacies of human life in the mother's womb. And before tucking Jesus in for his first outside-the-womb nap, the text tells us that Mary swaddled him. That is to say she bound him tightly in swaddling cloths. It's one of those details in the Nativity that's become so familiar to us that we tend to pass it by rather quickly without really thinking about it. But we need to ask, why does Luke tell us this? Of all the things he could have said in verse 7, of all the details we want to know as well, this seems a rather mundane and ordinary detail

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even if it does paint a tender picture for us. Is that all Luke is trying to do, to endear us to this scene?

You mothers know some of this, but I had to look it up. It turns out that swaddling the baby, it's pretty important. First and most basically, swaddling keeps the baby warm for the first few days of its life until its internal thermostat starts to kick in and activate. So, warmth is one reason, keeping all its limbs tucked in. Second, swaddling the baby in the warmth keeps the baby calm transitioning from a closed in, tight, restrictive environment in the womb, to an open expansive world outside the womb. That's pretty traumatic, pretty unsettling. So swaddling helps with that transition, keeping the baby calm. Not only that, but swaddling the baby by keeping the baby calm, it protects him from his own startle reflex. Have you seen that when babies jump, they're startled? The baby hasn't learned to control his muscular impulses yet, so his movements are involuntary, unintentional, random. His flailing arms, as you may have seen, can extend his sharp fingernails and cut his soft skin. Swaddling prevents that. In fact, some sources say swaddling alone can result in a 28% reduction in crying. I'm all for swaddling. Non-crying babies sleep better. That's a third

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thing, keeping the baby calm helps ensure the baby sleeps better and longer. So when baby sleeps, mom sleeps. When mom sleeps, mom is happy, everybody is happy. You know how that works. It's an arithmetic we can all understand. Not only that, but some say that immobilizing those arms and legs at that early age, it helps the baby eventually develop better motor skill organization just as the brain is working through all those issues.

So all of that, warmth, calm, protection, rest, growth and development, that's what Luke wants us to meditate on and think about as we see Jesus' first hour on the earth. He wants us to see this that Mary has swaddled her baby Jesus. This baby, who is the great Son of the Most High God. This baby, conceived under the shadow of the power of the Most High. This baby, conceived by the miraculous action of the Holy Spirit himself. This baby is a baby. He's human in every way. He's dependent on his mother. He's in need of protection and care and comfort like every other human baby. So, this is a clear and tender evidence that Luke is providing for us of the full humanity of Jesus Christ along with all its inherent weaknesses, all its inherent needs, all its dependency, its vulnerabilities. Jesus, like us,

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required the tender care of a mother, the provision and protection of his father, loving parents. Like us, Jesus is fully human, which is what God required to make him the sin-bearer, the one who would save us from our sins. You see how God's provision strategically and practically provided for Jesus Christ all through the normal stuff of life? All through our normal decisions God does what God does. Let's pray before him.

Heavenly Father, thank you that you are God. You do whatever you will to do. You are our God and our Savior, you're eternal and sovereign, and we rejoice in who you are. We rejoice in this precious story in Scripture about the birth of our Lord and Savior. We're so grateful for him. And we rejoice to come before you and give thanks, to worship, to meditate, really to give our lives for him in the worship of him and the honor and glory of him. We ask that you help us to do that, to give him honor and glory. Here in this Christmas season as we interact with people, let it not be about Christmas traditions and baking and decorations and Christmas trees and gifts and all the things that really are a nice time of the season for us as we enjoy family together, but let this be about the Gospel for us. Who is going to tell them if not us? Who's going to set the record straight if not us? Please use us, Father, to tell the story of the Gospel, to teach people the truth about salvation from sins

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that people might know and might be saved. We thank you that you've saved us, forgiving all of our sin and covering us in spotless righteousness of this beautiful child. It's in his name that we pray, Amen.