

(from 95, 2 wks in 2010- 12/12, 12/19) (Condensed to 1 for 12-26-21)

Intro: As we said last week, the Christmas story has 6 scenes that take place over a period of what could be 3 to 4 years,

-- which starts with Zachariah and Elizabeth, and ends with Joseph, Mary and Jesus returning to Nazareth from Egypt.

* In the middle of all that, is the main scene in Luke 2 of Jesus' actual birth in Bethlehem.

* This scene is short and contains basic information, but history sheds a great deal of light on what this situation would have been like for Joseph and Mary.

* The text divides into 3 points. I. THE REQUIREMENT OF ROME. (1-3)
 II. THE TRIP TO BETHLEHEM. (4-5) III. THE BETHLEHEM BIRTH. (6-7)

I. THE REQUIREMENT OF ROME. (1-3- read)

* This situation is based on the fact, that one of the main prophecies of Christ's coming is Micah 5:2 which tells us, the Messiah will come out of Bethlehem.

* Joseph and Mary were from Nazareth, and returned there after Christ's birth and their escape to Egypt, but God had to create a situation to get Mary to Bethlehem for Christ's birth.

* So the all-powerful God worked through the greatest world Empire and its leader, to create circumstances to fit what Micah prophesied, hundreds of years earlier.

* Notice- The leader, and His plan.

A. THE LEADER GOD USED.

* This man's title was Caesar Augustus (name- Octavian), he was 60 years old, the adopted nephew of Julius Caesar, who rose to power after Julius was assassinated in 44 B.C.

* After winning political battles with 2 co-leaders of the Empire, he became the first single ruler of the Empire in 27 B.C., and he's viewed as one of the greatest political rulers in history.

Q- "As a military genius, his armies highly respected him, and he established a long period of peace, prosperity, and solid government, and was a hard worker and a wise and loving ruler, who grew the culture by upholding family life and worship, as the nation's foundation."

* So this is the person God used to fulfilled His plan to bring Jesus to be born in Bethlehem.

B. THE PLAN THIS RULER SET UP.

- * When Octavian came to full power, there was no Empire-wide currency.
- * Each country had its own money, which hindered trade across national borders. (does today)
- * So Octavian had Roman coins produced, to be used all over the Empire; And to know how much money to distribute, and how much to tax each area, he ordered a census to be taken every 14 years, which required the people to register in their home town.

- * Although this trip was hard for the people, it was the most efficient way for a fair count to be taken throughout the Empire, so taxes and money were distributed fairly.
- * This process had started 5 years earlier, but government being slow, it took a long for it to reach the province of Judea, and God used that timing to send 2 young people from Nazareth in the north, to the right village in the south, to have their baby, in God's time.

SUM- These are short and verses with basic facts, but notice that they show us 2 rulers. Augustus and the Lord Jesus.

- * Augustus was the world's greatest man of that time, and because he was so efficient and cared for the people, he was literally glorified by all of the then-known-world, as the savior of the Empire-- And as such---
- he was being used to pave the way for the coming of the God-man, who was a complete unknown, but who was Deity from eternity past, and the real Ruler of mankind.

Q- Augustus was a long way from Nazareth and Bethlehem, and an even farther away from our sovereign God and His eternal plan. But by God's power, he did God's bidding anyway.

Point- God is in control, and this is His world, and He can and will use anything He wants, and anyone He wants, to do exactly what He wants, precisely when He wants.

- * And if we compare Scripture with history, this point is clearly proven, which is why Solomon said-- "The fool has said in his heart- there is no God."
- * Not only does our creation prove that there must be a Creator and sustainer of the universe, God's Word proves He must have written the bible, and must be controlling history.

II. THE TRIP TO BETHLEHEM. (4-5- read)

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* Now the story moves from a great king to a young couple in a Jewish town, who are now required to travel a long way to fulfill the great Roman Ruler's plan. **Note 2 things**

A. OBVIOUSLY, THIS TRIP WAS DIFFICULT.

- * In their Roman province, all women 12 years and older, had to pay a poll tax, so Mary being legally married, had to make the trip and register, in person, with Joseph.
- * This trip probably took place in late fall, because the shepherds were still watching their flocks by night, which was not done after the winter cold arrived. (spring- ewe's bore lambs)
- * This was a 90-mile trek (Jones to Grand Rapids), over difficult roads in shallow mountains, in the rainy season, where highway thieves were always common.
- * There were no motels, restaurants, no dollar stores. They camped out nightly with other travelers. And pregnant Mary may have traveled on a donkey, but we don't know.
- * Also note that in past months, pregnant Mary had gone to Zachariah and Elizabeth's, stayed 3 months then traveled home, and now 4-5 months later, she had to make this hard trip south, again, to Bethlehem. (This was much hardship for her)

B. THE TRIP ALSO INVOLVED DISGRACE. (4-5) This was true in 2 ways. (3 lessons)

1ST- Joseph and Mary were from Nazareth.

- This northern town was partly inhabited by pagans from Tyre/Sidon, and known for being a rough town, with "lowlifes", so it was viewed as a backward and despised place.
- In that time, if your father was a prominent man, you were called- Joseph son of -----.
- If not, your town identified who you were-- Joseph of Nazareth (Jesus of Nazareth)
- Also, because the Empire was a dangerous place, when you traveled, you were usually asked who you were by those you might camp with, or stay with.
- And Joseph having to identify himself as being from Nazareth, may be part of the reason they couldn't find a home to stay in, or a room at the inn.

2nd- Mary was betrothed but pregnant. (5)

- Betrothal took place about a year before the formal ceremony, and was legally binding,
- But the couple remained in their parent's home, sexually INACTIVE until they were joined by a ceremony. This was done to prove they were pure and good people.
- Now they're traveling, probably with others from the area, who already knew they were only betrothed, and obviously, she was very pregnant.

Summary- So they're taking a hard trip, in a despised situation, while in the middle offulfilling an awesome responsibility for the Lord- showing **3 truths about following the Lord.**

1st- Following the Lord involves practical sacrifice.

- This trip had to be made at what seemed the worst possible time, and Mary and Joseph must have wondered what God was doing by allowing this to happen.
- But God chose them for their dedication, and they had to pay a significant cost to exercise their faith, and obey God and be useful to Him.

App- Following Christ brings blessing in this life and the next, but many pursue religion for what they can get out of it, without ever accepting the cost involved.

* This shows it cost something to follow Christ. (deny, take cross, follow, save life-lose it)

2nd- Following Christ involves personal reproach.

- The world didn't praise Joseph and Mary for their marriage situation. And their families would have been viewed as spiritual failures by most of society.
- To be blessed by God they had to be disdained by people. This is the Christian life.
- Following the Lord is a life of submitting to His will and living a holy life, which is not popular in our Godless world. We have to decide whose approval we want, God's or men's.

3rd- When trials come, we need to remember that God has a plan.

- Through the whole thing, both in the positive and negative details, they had to trust that the Lord was in control, working His plan, and would care for them through it.
- God's control over the situation ran to the top of the Roman Empire, and God strategically guided His own Son and their parents, to the right place at God's chosen time.

III. THE BETHLEHEM BIRTH. (6-7- read) This emphasizes how lowly Christ's birth was.

* Notice 2 things- the humble details, and then, the spiritual pictures.

A. THE HUMBLE DETAILS OF CHRIST'S BIRTH. Historians describe this.

- * The town was crowded with more people than this little village had lodging for because of the census. Inns were rare, and were rough, seedy places to stay.
- * Most residents had a room or a lean-to for travelers, and people often formed relationships with residents near Jerusalem, to stay there when they came for various Jewish feasts.
- * When arriving, Joseph probably set up camp close to the village, then searched for a home to take them in, but there was none. The last choice was the Inn, but it was full as well.
- * The only place of shelter left was a nearby stable which were **caves**, and there's several caves on the east edge of Bethlehem, some about the size of a big bedroom.
- * So they set up in a corner of a cave, full of stinking animals, probably a shortage of hay, and Mary's labor began, and Jesus was born at night, in the dark. (Shepherd in fields)
- * From all the accounts, no one was there. This mid-teen girl delivered her first baby, God's miraculous child, all alone, with only Joseph there to help. (typically not allowed)
- * The baby was washed, probably with water from a drinking trough, then wrapped firmly in strips of rags for warmth and strength, then Mary placed Jesus in an animal's feeding trough, which was hewn out of stone so animals couldn't tip them over.
- * Mary's mother wasn't there for her, no singing or celebration from family waiting outside, no angels and no applause, just a scary, difficult, strange, lonely first-born birth.
- * Sometime soon that night, dirty stinking despised scorned shepherds, of all people, showed up all excited, with their own story about angels, and they worshipped the baby.
- * When they left, Mary pondered all these strange things that surrounded her son's birth.

Q- After 9 months of an exciting and trying conception and pregnancy, she must have thought -
'Is this how God wanted to bring us, His own eternal Son?'
'And If this is His birth, what's next?' (And they found out the hardship continued)

B. WHAT CHRIST'S HUMBLE BIRTH TEACHES US. >>>>>>

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* Christ was born in this lowly way, so God could display 4 things about God, Christ, humanity.

1. Christ's humble birth shows how far He lowered Himself to save mankind.

- He wasn't born in a palace with royalty, or a temple with prominent religious leaders, or even a home with a mid-wife or Mary's mother or family.

Q- Jesus left the highest place of beauty, purity and position, to take fully upon Himself the lowest place of physical poverty, relational disgrace, and spiritual sin, and God ordained this to demonstrate how far God had to come to save sinful man."

- It shows that we are helpless, hopeless sinners, who can't lift ourselves up to God, and meet Him even part way, or offer Him any human goodness to earn His favor. (2 Cor 8:9- "Though He was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor". (Phil 2:5-8)

- And God displayed this so fully, He didn't even allow Joseph to have enough money to buy someone out of their lodging place for a big profit. They had to go to a stable.

2. Christ's humble birth shows how depraved, selfish and unloving, mankind can be.

- Joseph and Mary were surrounded by Jews claiming to know God and His law, that taught a kind of love, that would care for this young family in their need. But no one did.

- In this situation, different people turned them away- Calloused people with no care at all; Residents- safe in their own comfort; Other travelers with their own problems to deal with.

- For whatever type or level of sin the people displayed, God's people, in sight of their own temple just 4 miles away, failed miserably, and turned away this needy young mother.

- And even after the Shepherds spread the news that Christ had been born right under their noses, people were only "amazed", and apparently did nothing to help them.

- The awful treatment that Joseph, Mary, and Jesus received shows just how sinful mankind is, and proves how badly we need as humans need Christ to come and save us from our sin.

- And because of their spiritual failure, they missed the opportunity to be visited by the angels and worship God's Son. That privilege went to lowly despised shepherds nearby.

Q- (Boice 66)- "Is Jesus in the stable of your life, or on the throne?

Until He reigns on the throne of your life, you can't see yourself as any better than those who slept comfortably, while Mary gave birth to her child in a cave".

3. Christ's humble birth pictures Christ's responsibility as our burden bearer.

- The stable was for animals who took burdens off of people's backs, to carry the load themselves- so those people would be free to enjoy the trip they were taking.

Q- "He took the burden of our sin to free us, and at the same time, brought the gracious gifts of God to us, so we could have joy in our journey which leads us home to God."

- To precede Isa 9:6-7- ("for unto us a child is born"), Isaiah wrote- "you have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor." (**Slaves** carried a rod with baggage on each side, as they were driven by a whip.)

Ps 55:22- Cast your burden on the LORD, 1Pe 5:7- casting all your care upon Him,

* As the burden bearer, He bore the burden of the penalty of our sin, and as believers, He bears the burdens of the lives we live for Him.

4. Christ's humble birth pictures God's supreme power.

- David, Israel's greatest king was born and anointed in Bethlehem, but by the time Christ came, Bethlehem was like Micah said- "little among the thousands of Judah".

- It was a little village that lost its significance in the shadow of Jerusalem, which was Israel's center for the religious and high-class wealthy people, and their supposed greatness.

- But God sent His Son to be born as an unknown, and placed with common people, then rejected in a hostile setting, all with very little of what the world had to offer.

- And from that situation, God brought us the greatest Person, to perform the greatest task of all time, to conquer man's sin, and give humanity eternal life.

- God doesn't need the world's greatness to further His kingdom.

He can use the most insignificant things to accomplish His will. (1 Cor 1:25-31)

Q- He was born in a stable in a nothing village, for God to show how futile human pride, ambition, self-righteousness, and flattery are; To show how God rejects man's supposed greatness, and that God needs nothing of what man thinks is important to save them. He did this to show how seldom appearances correspond with reality".

(Handel Brown 27-28- see full quote- part from John MacArthur)

Concl: Micah 5:2 said Bethlehem would be Messiah's birth place, and this was well known.

* Bethlehem means "house of bread" and God used that place to give us "the bread of life".

* Also, the word "Ephrathah" - was another name for Bethlehem which meant 'fruitfulness',
And no one's life was more eternally fruitful than Jesus' life on earth.

* Luke 2 shows God created the perfect situation of a crowded town, with no room, being born in a stable, and laid in a manger, to fulfill the spiritual pictures about Christ's humble birth.

* John Phillips wrote about the great contrasts we can see in Christ's birth.

Q- "He endured a human birth to give us a new spiritual birth; Occupied a stable that we might occupy a mansion; had an earthly mother so we might have a heavenly Father; became a slave that we might be free; left His glory to give us glory; was poor that we might be rich; was welcomed by lowly Shepherds so we could be welcomed by glorious angels; And was hunted by Herod that we might be delivered from Satan. Christ's coming is the reversal of roles, at God's cost, for our benefit."

@ **There's a song-** **"This is such a strange way to save the world".**

* But for God to save humanity from their sin, Christ had to be born into the world as a human.

1. He had to be a human to be justly punishable for humans (the proper substitute for humanity)
2. He had to be divine holy God, to be the perfect man, fully acceptable to the Father.
3. He had to be the powerful Creator, in whom all life dwells, to pay the price for all of humanity's sin.

@ These three conditions could only be met if Christ were born a human, by God, through Mary.

At Christmas most will completely ignore Jesus; Some will slightly acknowledge His birth for a few weeks, but will miss the very reason why He came, which was to pay our sin penalty, give us a godly submissive life, and deliver us safely to God.