

Jesus' Birth in Bethlehem, Part 2

Luke 2:1-7

42-23

Sunday after Sunday we are rejoicing in the study of the gospel of Luke. If you will, open your Bibles to Luke chapter 2. There's a Bible there in the pew for those of you who didn't have one this morning. And we're going to look at the second chapter of Luke.

This is probably the most familiar story in all of Christianity because it is the story of the birth of Jesus Christ, and the most familiar of all holidays is Christmas which, of course, focuses on the birth of Christ. So a lot of folks know about Christmas, a lot of folks know something about the birth of Christ. Most people don't know all of the rich detail that Luke provides for us here. And you can move through this rather rapidly and it seems pretty simple and straightforward, but if you slow down a little bit, as we tend to do, and dig in a little deeper you find some profound things that are going on behind the scenes. Luke is a remarkable, remarkable historian. His selectivity under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit is rich and profound and we are being enriched as we go along.

Luke chapter 2, Luke is one of the four gospel writers, one of the four writers who tell the story of Jesus Christ. This is what he says in chapter 2, the first seven verses.

"Now it came about in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth. This was the first census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria and all were proceeding to register for the census, everyone to his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee from the city of Nazareth to Judea to the city of David which is called Bethlehem because he was of the house and family of David in order to register along with Mary who was engaged to him and was with child. And it came about that while they were there the days were completed for her to give birth and she gave birth to her firstborn son and she wrapped him in cloths and laid Him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn."

That last statement, "there was no room for them at the inn," has become a very familiar part of Christmas lore. And it really is not legend. It is fact as that text indicates. We've all seen "no vacancy" signs posted outside motels and sometimes, I suppose, we've seen "no vacancy" signs when we didn't want to see them and there was a certain level of desperation, it was very late, the kids were in need of a place to sleep and the town was crowded and the "no vacancy" sign spelled for us a very serious potential situation. Well as far as Joseph and Mary were concerned, their circumstances made the "no vacancy" sign in Bethlehem all the more severe since Mary was about to deliver a baby. This young couple, Joseph probably being fourteen or fifteen, Mary thirteen or fourteen years of age; the two of them had journeyed about eighty-five to ninety miles from their home in Nazareth.

They had gone through land that was literally filled with sacred memories, memories which they would have because they knew the Old Testament history and the Old Testament stories. Shiloh would greet them, where Hannah came to pray for a child before the Lord. And then there was

Gilgal, where her son Samuel sat to judge Israel. They may have passed through the Valley of Baca, which the psalmist had sung, and the road perhaps would wind pass Bethel with all its patriarchal memories and Rama, where Jeremiah pictured Rachel weeping for her children. And then they would climb up a little bit to Gibeon, where Solomon worshiped. And finally they would come to the great metropolis of Jerusalem and passing through Jerusalem would go by Mount Moriah by the hill of Zion, across the top of that mountain, that plateau on which Jerusalem sits. About six miles further they would come to the village of Bethlehem — Bethlehem, the town of Ruth and Boaz; Bethlehem, the place where Jacob's first love, Rachel, died and was buried. And even the taxi drivers will point to the right as you go from Jerusalem to Bethlehem and say that's Rachel's tomb. But Bethlehem was most notably the town where David was born, David the greatest king that Israel had ever known, David the great ancestor of royalty out of whose loins eventually would come the Messiah, the great King of all kings who would rule over a kingdom in Israel that would extend across the face of the earth and would last forever.

And when they came to Bethlehem, it says in verse 7, there was no room for them. Nine months pregnant, in a matter of a few days to deliver a baby, and no place to stay. No relatives awaiting with a warm home. It was late fall or early winter. Nobody to care for this little couple, no room for them. And that note certainly is symbolic of the future for Jesus. It seems to me that as far as Jesus is concerned there's still a "no vacancy" sign hanging on the world.

Before we look, however, at the young couple, let me go back in the text a little bit because there's so much more here that we need to understand. Reviewing briefly, a startling event happened back in chapter 1 verse 26. In the sixth month of the pregnancy of Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, an angel came by the name of Gabriel to a city in Galilee. Galilee is the northern part of the land of Israel. It was Nazareth and it really was a town. This messenger from God came to Nazareth which was a non-descript kind of off the beaten track blue-collar town. And in that town the angel came directly to a virgin, as I said, probably a thirteen-year-old girl. She had been betrothed or engaged to a young man whose name was Joseph and Joseph was a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. To a non-descript town to a non-descript family to an obscure girl came Gabriel. And this is what Gabriel said, "Hail, favored one, the Lord is with you." Of course, she was greatly troubled at the statement and kept pondering what kind of salutation this might be. Nobody had seen an angel in literally 400-plus years, perhaps 500 years, until an angel appeared to Zacharias and Elizabeth, and this was the same angel, Gabriel, who's appearing again. She is afraid. The angel says don't be afraid. Verse 31, the angel says, "You will conceive in your womb, you will bear a Son, you shall name Him Jesus." That's the announcement from God to you. You're going to have a baby and your baby will be Jesus. Jesus means savior and He will save His people from their sins, as Matthew records it.

Further, the baby is described in verse 32, "He will be great, He will be called the Son of the Most High," the Most High is a term for God, El Elyon. "He will be called the Son of God. The Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David, He will reign over the house of Jacob forever and His kingdom will have no end." It will have no limit, it will have no end. You're going to have a baby. Your baby is going to be the Son of God, as well as your son. He is going to be David's heir. He is going to reign over the throne that was promised to David and His reign will have no limit and no end. Of course, this young girl, Mary, said to the angel, "How can this be since I'm a virgin?" This is impossible. The angel said, "Here's how it's going to happen, verse 35, "the Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you and for that reason the holy offspring shall be called the Son of God." In other words, it's going to be a miraculous conception. God is

going to plant life in you without a man. Verse 37: "Nothing is impossible with God."

So the promise had come to this young girl that she was going to be the mother of a baby, even though she was a virgin. The baby would be miraculously conceived by God. The baby would be the Son of God, God in human flesh. When Mary appeared soon after this to be pregnant and Joseph to whom she was engaged found out about it, he was shocked, he was stunned because there was no explanation for her pregnancy humanly than that she had had a relationship with someone else. Joseph knew her to be a godly young girl, a righteous young girl. He was shaken by the fact that she was pregnant and was trying to decide what to do, whether to divorce her, to break the engagement covenant or whether to stone her to death for this sin when an angel appeared to him, as recorded in Matthew chapter 1, and said to him, "Don't be afraid to take her as your wife because that which is conceived in her is by the Holy Spirit and she's going to bring forth a child named Jesus and this child is going to be Jesus because He will save His people from their sins. And further, His name will be Immanuel which means God with us." And Joseph got the message from the angel that she was with child by the Holy Spirit to bring into the world the King, the Savior, God in human flesh.

Now when you come to Luke 2, the prophecy has come to pass. Nine months have passed since Gabriel's announcement. Mary is full term and she in this passage gives birth to the baby Jesus. Now as Luke tells us the story of the birth, which is very simply told, the beginning of verse 7, "And she gave birth." That's it. Another one of those classic understatement, "and she gave birth." Nothing particular about that birth of note; it was like any other and every other birth. The child was not like any other child. The birth was like every other birth. And we'll look at that in a moment.

But Luke, wanting us to grasp the significance of what's going on, provides for us, as any good historian does, a setting for this event. The event is verse 7, she gave birth. The setting is what enriches it and informs it. And he...he works his way down, starts with the world setting and then a national setting and then a personal setting. First we learn the role that the larger world played in this, then the world that is uniquely designed by God for the nation Israel, and then the particular circumstances of the couple in Bethlehem and the birth of the baby. And so we get the big picture and narrow it down to the little picture so that we can grasp in every perspective the wonderful, solemn richness of this remarkable, unheard-of event.

First of all, the world setting, and I gave that to you last week. We'll just mention it is in verses 1 to 3, "It came about in those days," that is the days when Herod was reigning as an Idumaeen king in Israel, the days when Gabriel came to Elizabeth and Zacharias, the days when John, the prophet and forerunner of Messiah, was born, those very same days. "It came about in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth. This was the first census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria and all were proceeding to register for the census, everyone to his own city."

It's amazing how God orchestrates everything. Whether He has a willing or an unwilling subject, whether He has a knowing or an unknowing subject, part of God bringing together the details and all the components of the birth of Messiah, right time, right place, was to move on the mind of a pagan, godless Caesar who knew nothing about the Old Testament, nothing about the coming of Messiah, nothing about God whatsoever. He was in every sense a pagan and yet he paid a critical role in the fulfillment of prophecy at the birth of the God-Man, the Messiah, Jesus Christ. And it was because he made a decree.

His name was Caesar Augustus. That's why... That's how we know him in the New Testament. His actual name was Gaius Octavius. He's known as Octavian. That was his given name. "Caesar" is a term like king, or emperor, or pharaoh. It's simply a title. "Augustus" is an adjective meaning revered one, or honored one, or majestic one. And it was a title given to him in 27 B.C. by the Roman Senate. His actual name, Gaius Octavius, he is known as Octavian Caesar but became known as Caesar Augustus because the Roman Senate honored him with that description.

He ruled the Roman Empire for forty-five years. He was a brilliant man. He was a formidable ruler. He created the *Pax Romana*, the Roman Peace that stretched over the whole Roman Empire, the farthest point of Europe in the west, east of Baalbek in the Middle East. He was a gifted, gifted ruler and leader. He was such a remarkable man that he was called, and it's inscribed in stone, "the savior of the world." That's how highly he was revered. He was worshiped as a god and as a deity.

This one who was the false savior of the world knew absolutely nothing about the birth of the true Savior of the world. But in the normal course of his rule he determined that a census needed to be taken in the Roman Empire. The Roman Empire was vast and he used census basically for taxation. That's the same reason we have census today in our own country, to identify all the citizens so they can be taxed. And that's exactly what was happening in that day. He wanted to tax the full extent of the Roman Empire because he was providing services for all of these nations which had become vassals to the great power of Rome. And so he made a decree that the whole of the inhabited earth, just a way to say the whole known world, which would be all the known world in the Roman Empire at that time, that they all would be registered literally. This was the first census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. And I told you last Sunday that would have been in 8 B.C. When you work all the chronology backwards of the years, you would have a known census in the year 6 A.D. and they were at fourteen-year intervals, as history tells us. So fourteen years before that, the first census would have been 8 B.C., the second one in 6 A.D., fourteen years later. The census was made in 8 B.C. However, there was not compliance with that census apparently in Judah until two to four years later. The Jews did not like to pay taxes to Rome and apparently Herod was able to stall it off as long as possible. Finally in somewhere around 6 to 4 B.C. they were forced to comply. In fact they were forced to comply with such specificity that there was evidently a deadline like an April 15 deadline that we have in which you had to be registered. And that's why Joseph and the very pregnant Mary had to make a ninety-mile journey walking or riding a bumpy donkey over very rough terrain in the late fall or winter to do this thing and couldn't have put it off any longer. And all of that fit into the purposes of God to be sure that they were there in Bethlehem when that child was born because that was God's plan.

Caesar didn't know anything about this. Herod didn't know anything about the purposes and plan of God. But God was working all the details on a world setting. From Caesar's standpoint he was taxing. It was at a time when a man named Quirinius was governor of Syria. It was the first of two periods in which he exercised some official duty. He was also a ruler at the second census that came along in 6 A.D. Now we don't know any more than somewhere around 6 to 4 B.C. is when Jesus was born. The people who read Luke originally would...would know more specifically. But we don't have any records as to anything more specific than in that general time frame when Jesus was born. So He wasn't actually born in say zero A.D., but rather somewhere between 6 and 4 B.C. Six at the earliest, four at the latest He was born, and He was born literally in Bethlehem as a result of the political strategies of a godless, pagan Caesar.

Verse 3, everybody had to register for the census and it says, "Everyone to his own city." Now, that

was not a Roman stipulation as far as we know. The Romans would have been happy for people to register in the town they lived in. So it's most likely that the fact that they went back to the city of their ancestry that there was a Jewish stipulation, either by Herod or by some tradition. Since this is the first census the Romans had, there wouldn't have been any tradition in censuses since there hadn't been any prior censuses by the Roman government. So it most likely was a Jewish prescription. The Jews decided that everybody should go back to the place where the records were kept. You remember when the children of Israel came to the land of Canaan the whole land was divided into sections and tribes were given sections. And in those tribal sections families were given areas and among those families there would be certain areas they would live in and certain villages their ancestors would have settled in. And that's where they would go. They were fastidious about keeping genealogical records. By the way, the Romans in 70 A.D. when they destroyed Jerusalem, they destroyed all the Jewish records, all of them. But at the time that the census was taken, those records would have been carefully kept by scribes in all the local areas. And so I'm sure by Jewish demand they were to go back to the place of their original ancestry.

That was all very, very critical to the purposes of God so that the Messiah would be born in the place that God had determined. Had Caesar Augustus made his decree earlier or later, had Herod resisted shorter or longer, the child would have been born in Nazareth and not have fulfilled...fulfilled prophecy and we could conclude that God couldn't control circumstances. But that didn't happen and it never happens because God controls everything. God literally writes history as His story.

Let's turn to the second setting, the national setting. Luke is concerned now to move from the world scene to the land of Israel itself. And so in verses 4 and 5 he says, "And Joseph also went up from Galilee from," or literally in the Greek, *ek*, out of, "the city of Nazareth" where they lived "to Judea," that's the lower portion of Israel, "to the city of David which is called Bethlehem," probably a term meaning house of bread. And he went there "because he was of the house and family of David in order to register along with Mary who was engaged to him and was with child."

Now this gets us into the context of the land of Israel. We're out of the Roman Empire. We're away from Quirinius and Caesar Augustus. We're now talking about Galilee, Nazareth, Judea and the city of David, Bethlehem, etc. We're now looking at the nation Israel. And the nation Israel is connected to Scripture. God gave to the Jews the Scripture. And the Scripture was very, very specific about where the Messiah was to be born.

There was a prophet by the name of Micah and in his prophecy, Micah chapter 5 and verse 2, this is what we read, "But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah." If you go back to Genesis 35:19, not to go there, just in your mind if you go there, Genesis 35:19, you will find this village was called Ephrathah originally, later became known as Bethlehem. And so the prophet identifies it by both names, Bethlehem Ephrathah. He says "you are little among the clans of Judah," or too little to be among the clans of Judah. There's a couple of ways to translate that. In other words, it's insignificant. It was always a very small place, insignificant. "But from you," Micah 5:2, "one will go forth for me to be ruler in Israel." You're going to give birth to a ruler.

It can't be David that he's talking of, even though David was born there, because David had been born 300 years before this. David was born a thousand years before the Messiah. Micah's prophecy was 700 years before the Messiah. So here we are. Micah is talking 700 years before the birth of Messiah. He says, "One will go forth for me to be ruler in Israel."

You say, "How do you know it's the Messiah?" Because the next line says, "His goings forth are from long ago from the days of eternity." He is an eternal being. There will be a ruler born in Bethlehem who has been alive forever. That is a very specific prophecy. His appearances are from long ago, from eternity. An eternally existing one will become ruler born in Bethlehem, born in Bethlehem. So Luke wants us to understand this. He never... Interestingly enough, he never mentions the prophecy of Micah. Luke never refers to the prophecy of Micah, doesn't say anything about it. But every Jew who was waiting for the Messiah knew the prophecy of Micah. It was an unmistakable prophecy, unmistakable. And Matthew does mention it. In Matthew chapter 2 Matthew says, "It has been written by the prophet, "And you Bethlehem,"" and so forth, "Out of you shall come forth a ruler who will shepherd My people Israel."

They knew that Bethlehem was to be the place of Messiah, they who knew their Old Testament and waited for the redemption of Israel. Luke doesn't need to mention it, it was crystal clear. Besides, Matthew specifically mentions it. But it becomes very important because when Caesar Augustus put the census in motion, the end result of that was this young couple were going to be in Bethlehem, and because of the date established, they were going to be there at the very moment when that child was born. They went there in the ninth month of her pregnancy.

So, Joseph went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth to Judea. By the way, going up, you look at a map, you see Galilee up here, you see Judea down here, you think that's up. Well it's up on the page on the map, but geographically Galilee is lower than Bethlehem. In fact, Nazareth sits up on a hill on the north part of the Plain of Esdraelon, the Valley of Megiddo, and you would go down into the valley or the plain and you would start a slow climb to about 2,564 feet or so to where Bethlehem is, almost on the same hill as Jerusalem. So that's why it says he went up.

He went up to the city of David, it says, up to the city of David. Judea is the southern region. The city of David is called Bethlehem, it says. And I want to tell you something here that...because I don't want you to be mistaken about your understanding of this, "to the city of David which is called Bethlehem." If you go to the Old Testament and you read the city of David... If you're looking, for example, in 2 Samuel chapter 5 and elsewhere, you'll read about the city of David. In the Old Testament the city of David refers to the hill of Zion in Jerusalem where David sat as king. In fact, you will...if you talk to a historian or a guide in Israel, they even call this section of Mount Zion which is a little bit to the south of the temple mount in Jerusalem, that they call that hill of Zion the city of David. The city of Jerusalem was the larger city; the city of David was the place where David reigned and ruled on Mount Zion. It was the city of David within the city of Jerusalem. So when you're reading in the Old Testament about the city of David, it's referring to the Mount Zion where David reigned. But here he tells us the city of David he's referring to is called Bethlehem. That also is a city of David. It's not the city where he reigned. It's the city where he was born. That too is a city of David. He was born in Bethlehem.

Now Bethlehem, as I said, was a pretty obscure place. But there was a man living there identified in 1 Samuel 16 as Jesse, the Bethlehemite. And in 1 Samuel 16 God goes to Samuel and He says, look, I'm, I've had it with Saul, he's history. Saul's out, I have pronounced a curse on his line, so forth. And He says to Samuel, so we're going to have to get a new king. I want you to go to Bethlehem because there's a man there by the name of Jesse, a Bethlehemite, and I'm going to pick one of his sons.

As it turned out, you've got everybody all shined up and polished and all the sons stood in line and

God picked the most unlikely one. He picked the baby boy of the family, David. But he was a son of Jesse the Bethlehemite, 1 Samuel 16.

Now it's important then, since Micah said the Messiah is going to be born in Bethlehem that the Messiah be born in Bethlehem. And so, God uses Caesar Augustus, uses Herod, all the political machinations work together, and here comes Joseph down to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, and he goes there because he was of the house and family of David. As we learned earlier in chapter 1, verses 25 and 26, he was a descendant of David. As we'll find out in chapter 3, Mary was also a descendant of David. And that's important. Through Mary and Jesus got royal blood; through His father, Joseph, who was His...who was not His physical father but was His earthly father, He got the right to be the ruler. So they went down to register because they were supposed to register in the house of their ancestors.

And again I remind you, all of this is perfect in the plan of God, providentially getting them exactly where they need to be because the Messiah was a son of David and was to be born in the city of David. The prophet said so. In order to fulfill that prophecy, that couple had to be there and God made sure they were.

Verse 5 says they went to register for the census, along with Mary who was engaged to him and was with child. Really a fearful thing for a fifteen-year-old and a thirteen-year-old or so to take such a trip under such circumstances.

Now historians have struggled over this issue of "along with Mary." Was it required that she go there to register? Wouldn't it have been enough for a father to register for his...his wife and his family? We really don't know the answer to that. We don't know whether she needed to register or not. We don't know whether it was required to have her signature, or whether it was required to have her indicate some properties or some ancestry or whatever. We don't know that. But we do know this, that upon being pregnant she knew there was only one person in the world who would understand her condition. It must have been difficult to explain to her mother and her father how all of a sudden a thirteen-year old girl appears pregnant and she's never had a relationship with a man. And everybody is suspicious that she is lying. It would have been hard enough for her parents to understand that, let alone strangers and outsiders. One can only imagine the gossip which must have gone on, a certain amount of shame that she must have had to bear.

And we also know that she perhaps went to visit Elizabeth for those three months as a way not only to connect with somebody who would understand a conception miracle because she had been allowed to conceive John in her old age, but to get her out of that environment where she was exposed to so much potential shame because she was pregnant. If in fact she had gone to be with Elizabeth for the three months and now she was so obviously pregnant and having arrived in her nine month she would have been exposed to more gossip, more scorn, I don't think there's any way in the world that Joseph who had to make the trip to register would ever have gone without her. I think it was a way for him to take her out of that environment, which was very difficult for her and it's also for certain that he wanted to be there when that little life came into the world.

He knew what was going on. He knew she was pregnant with the Son of God. He wasn't about to say, "You know, I've got a business trip, you might have the Son of God while I'm gone." I don't think so. I really don't think so. I think this is one you don't want to miss. He knew. He knew this was Jesus to save His people from their sins because the angel told him that. He knew this was Immanuel, God

with us. He knew what Gabriel had told Mary. How many times had Mary rehearsed that conversation? I can imagine when he first found out she was pregnant and she said, "Well it's like this, Joseph, Gabriel came and told me I was going to be impregnated by God." Sure. How many times did she have to tell him that? Well probably a lot of times until the angel finally appeared to him and told him the story and now he knew exactly what was going on. They had to go. Worldly conditions pressed them to go. There wasn't any way he was going without her.

So a forced journey to Bethlehem was necessary for the Word of God to be fulfilled. Bethlehem was the place because that was their lineage. That was the place they needed to be because that was the home of David the great king. And that again would insure by virtue of Scripture not only the decree of Caesar but by virtue of Scripture God moved them there to fulfill the clear statement of the prophet Micah.

Now a little note here: It says Mary was engaged to him, engaged to him. That's interesting because in Matthew 1:24 it says they had married. In fact it says Joseph arose from his sleep after the angel came and told him that she...that she was a virgin, yes, and that she had been given a child by God and that he could go ahead and take her as his wife because she was pure. This was a divine miracle. When he arose from his sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him. He took her as his wife and kept her a virgin until she gave birth to a son. He took her as a wife. He took her as his wife.

What that indicates is there was a marriage ceremony. I think he actually married her at that point. It's pretty clear in that text. That would have been the right thing to do. That would have quelled a lot of questions, at least you could introduce her as your wife and not, well, this is my betrothed who is with child. He covered her in kindness by going ahead with the ceremony. So they were actually... There actually was a ceremony, there actually was a wedding. I believe a marriage did legally take place.

But what Luke tells us here is quite interesting and it's very, I think, carefully put together where you have the marriage indicated in Matthew and yet here it says "who was engaged to him." And what Luke is telling us by backing off from that marriage and there was a fine... There was really only a thin line between being betrothed and being married. The betrothal was a binding contract. Luke is telling us, yes, there was a ceremony but they were conducting themselves as though they were only engaged. And it says in Matthew 1:25 that he kept her a virgin until the child was born.

So both Matthew, who identifies the ceremony, which would have been the right thing to do because she did have a child in her womb and Luke who tells us that they were in a relationship that in effect was a betrothal or an engagement, give us both sides so that we can understand the situation. She was with child.

Ken Hughes said, "The baby Mary carried was not a Caesar, a man who would become god, but a far greater wonder, the true God who would become a man."

So the world setting and the national setting, all fitting in with Roman strategy and Old Testament prophecy. Now we come to the personal setting, and this is where the charm of the story comes. The personal setting; Luke's focus now is not on the world scene, it's not on the national scene. It's on the personal circumstances that are so interesting. "It came about," verse 6, "that while they were there."

I stop there and I say, OK, where? Bethlehem. Where in Bethlehem? We have no idea. We have no idea. They were just there. We don't know how long they were there. They were there days because the days were completed for her to give birth. They were there. We don't know where. For how long we don't know. Some days, maybe three, maybe four, maybe six, maybe seven. I don't know, maybe eight. I...we don't know. They were there.

It doesn't tell us where they were. But it does tell us at the end of verse 7, "There was no room for them in the inn." And I'll tell you this, if there had been room in an inn for the prior days, nobody in their right mind would have kicked them out when she was about to deliver the baby. But some have suggested that for the first few days they were there they stayed with relatives. Well what relative in the world is going to kick them out on the day of the birth of the child? The fact of the matter is wherever they were when the baby was born was where they had been the whole time they were there. They just were there for an unstated time in an undesignated place.

Simple words which excite profound imagination; they were the homeless. They were the homeless. I'll say more about that in a few minutes. There were certain shelters, as there are today, provided for people who were homeless. Public shelters. And you can be sure of this, the Roman soldiers, the Roman registrars who were doing the registration of the people, all the Roman dignitaries, believe me, occupied whatever few guest rooms existed in a little tiny place like Bethlehem which probably, when you think of an inn you think of some kind of three-story motel. No such thing existed. Whatever accommodations there were would have been taken by the officials, the Roman officials or the Jewish officials who were running this whole thing.

So they were there and the days were completed for her to give birth. Nine months was up. Absolutely nothing said about the details, nothing. And she, verse 7, gave birth. That's all it says. I just wish there was more than that. Can I indulge in a little sanctified imagination? Not stretching the point, I hope. I can imagine Joseph just almost beside himself with curiosity. I mean, if you knew that your wife was going to give birth to the God-Man you might have a few imaginations about what this child might be like, probably holding her hand through the long silent night of her labor, perhaps smoothing her forehead with a cool cloth. Perhaps speaking sweet comfort to his dear young wife as she spent hours in labor in a place that offered no comforts, no doctors, no nurses, no mother. Every girl would want her mother there. No family, just a thirteen-year old and a fifteen-year old. Hours of labor, just a teen-aged husband to help. And finally she at the culmination of the labor, at the glorious moment pushes one more time and pushes out the Son of God. And He cried the cry of life.

In the fullness of time God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, Immanuel, the God of eternity stepped into time and space. The Lord of immensity, the Lord of omnipresence was confined to a body about ten pounds in weight and under two feet in length. That little life came out into the arms of that young father. And neither of them could fathom what was going on. And they had been told by an angel. And everybody around them had absolutely no idea.

Luke is careful to tell us that she gave birth to her firstborn son, *prōtotokon*, firstborn. He does not use *monogenēs*, only son. The Roman Catholic Church would have you believe she had only one child and she was a perpetual virgin till her death. That is not true. She had many sons and daughters. It says, I read you a little bit ago in Matthew 1:24 and 25 that he kept her a virgin until Jesus was born. After that Joseph and Mary had normal relationships as any other husband and wife would and they had boys and they had girls. In Matthew's gospel, chapter 12, we are introduced to Jesus' brothers. In chapter 13 they're even named for us; Jesus' brothers who were born to Joseph

and Mary, half brothers actually, James, Joseph, Simon, Judas. Verse 56, and His sisters are mentioned as well. You know, the crowd at that point was incredulous. They were saying, you know, Jesus, this is nobody special. They said, this is just a carpenter's son. His mother is Mary, His brothers are James and Joseph and Simon and Judas, and His sisters, they're all with us. They just looked at that family as an ordinary family. They've got a whole family full of kids. We read... We meet His brothers again later on. Luke records their appearance in chapter 8. We read about His brothers in John 2, John 7; that they didn't believe. We read about His brothers again in Acts 1. Jesus was not the only son Mary had, Jesus was not the *monogenēs*, the only begotten. He was *prōtotokon*, the firstborn.

And, you see, that's very important because not only is He the firstborn which, of course, means that she was a virgin but He is the firstborn which, of course, means that He has the right to the inheritance, He has the primogenitor, as it was called, the primary right to the family inheritance. Frankly, Joseph didn't have a lot to leave Him. He was a tradesman, he was a carpenter. Mary didn't have any great estate, as far as we know, to leave Him. But what they did have was the right to the throne of Israel. There hadn't been a king in a long time in Israel, a long time. And the Babylonians had devastated that whole thing and they were followed by the Medo-Persians and they were followed by the Greeks and they were followed by the Romans. And somebody was always ruling in Israel but it wasn't in the royal line of David, but the royal line was still there and it was there in the life of Joseph and in the life of Mary. And what they passed on to Jesus was the right to rule on the throne of David. He was the firstborn. If you study the Old Testament you find how important that firstborn inheritance was.

And then some simple details that I find amazing. "She wrapped Him in cloths." You ever ask? Why is that there? Because that was normal, that was routine. This is just a birth like every other birth. And a Jewish mother did this typically. You can find this in all the indications in history about babies that are born. They would wrap them in cloths. The Greek word is "She swaddled Him." Swaddled Him. That's why we talk about swaddling cloths. "Swaddled" is an Old English word to describe wrapping. And here's what they would do. The custom was, take long strips of cloth and wrap the arms and wrap the legs and then wrap the little body tightly. This was for warmth. This was for security. I mean, that little baby in the womb is in there all cuddled and nestled tightly in there and all of a sudden comes out into this stark hospital room, nothing touching it, his little extremities flailing in every way. No wonder they're screaming. This is a violent experience.

They would just take that little baby immediately and they also believed that wrapping up those limbs and wrapping up that little body protected that little child, also believed that it helped to keep their bones straight when they grew in early life.

The point is she treated the baby like any other baby. This is just a normal little baby. This is just a baby like other babies. Physically looked like any other child. Physically treated like any other child. No royal robes, no fancy clothing, didn't come out with a little halo over His head. He came out like everybody else comes out, same exact way. No doubt kissing that little boy as she wrapped him tightly and warmly and caressed Him, nursed Him.

And then it says, most interestingly, "And laid Him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn." Manger is the word *phatēn*... *phatnē* in Greek. It means a feeding trough, a feeding trough. By the way, it never says in the Bible Jesus was born in a stable. It's not in there, so if you've been looking for it you won't find it. It doesn't say He was born in a stable, doesn't use the word

"stable." Tradition, old tradition is that He was born in a cave. It doesn't say He was born in a cave. All it does say is He was laid in a manger and from that we can deduce that it was a stable because that's an animal feeding trough and it says there was no room for them in the inn. And that indicates that they couldn't get into the facility for people and so in every facility for people in ancient times there was an adjacent facility for the animals which they had with them when they traveled. You see a motel and immediately outside a motel what do you see? A parking lot. Well the means of transportation in ancient times was animals and so they carried goods on their animals. If you were a traveling salesman, you had a beast of burden to carry your goods. That's how it was. If you were a traveling family, you had a beast of burden to carry the women and children. And so there would be adjacent to every place to stay, a place for the animals and a feed trough as well. The indication was there was no room for them in the guest house and they were outside and the little one was laid in a feeding trough.

Down in verse 16 it refers to that again. When the shepherds finally came to see Him, they found the baby as He lay in the feed trough. Now that is pretty good indication that it was a stable.

There was no room in the inn. Let me talk about that for a minute. There's so much confusion about that scenario. I remember when I was a little kid. I think I was about eight. I was selected to play the inn keeper's son in the Christmas pageant. And I remember, never forget it, because I wore this funny little tunic and they put makeup on my legs, you know. And as a little guy I thought that was so strange. But I was the inn keeper's son and the inn keeper was a really rotten guy, really rotten guy and he wouldn't let Jesus' mother and dad in. And so his son grew up to be Barabbas. That was the story. And so I was...I was the childhood bad guy, Barabbas. Frankly it was poor casting. Worse, worse than that it was a ridiculous fabrication. But anyway, they made this inn keeper into such a bad guy, his kid turned out to be Barabbas, arch criminal of Israel, you remember, who was offered to the crowd instead of Jesus. Well that was all apocryphal. But there have been a lot of strange things about the poor inn keeper but as far as we know there wasn't one.

Let me tell you why. "Inn" is the word *kataluma*. But it's not the normal Greek word for inn. There's a different word for inn in the Greek used in, for example, chapter 10 of Luke verse 34. This word simply means "shelter." It means "place of lodging." It means just guest facilities, or guest quarters. It doesn't refer to an actual inn being operated for feeding and housing guests as such. It's a very, very broad word. It's a lodging place and probably refers to a place of public shelter, more like a campground. It's very unlikely that there would have been an actual commercial inn in this little village. But they would have some kind of public area. Typically they would build it on four sides, two floors. It would be like a shelter, the top part being like a loft in a barn. One part of it might even be enclosed, or it might have some...some rather primitive ability to close the doors but it would be very, very primitive kind of places where people in transit could stay and they would perhaps have four sides and in the middle the animals would be kept where they would be protected and kept from people who would steal. And then their goods would be kept there as well. Perhaps such a caravan stopping station or a public guest facility would have as well places on the second floor and the first floor for the people to stay where they could keep their animals close by.

This would have been an overcrowded situation, I already told you. The Romans would have probably taken up most of the spots, as well as some Jewish officials. And then the people coming back to their hometown to register, the place became very, very crowded. The rooms were all taken. Again it was probably, as I said, public shelter. They wound up, this little couple, just staying with the animals outside the appropriate quarters.

Now if you were in that condition you probably had to carry your own bedding. If there was no place for you in the guest room, they might have provided some, you know, rough place to lie on a straw mattress and maybe a straw pillow or a blanket. But if you were on the outside, you had to have your own blanket and your own pillow. And if you had no blanket, you'd wind up wrapping yourself in your own robe and trying to find a place out of the wind because it could be very cold. You would be down there probably on the ground floor where the animals were kept in the middle, pack animals, camels, donkeys. Here you would find your rest for the night. For days, we don't know how many days, Joseph and Mary were huddled in that kind of a place. We don't know when they registered or if they had to wait a long time to get to the head of the line to register. We don't know whether they had already registered and Joseph didn't want to take her back because he knew that she was going to give birth at any day. They were going to wait there until the birth came. It may well have been that they even knew the prophet Micah had said Bethlehem and they wanted to be sure they stayed there. None of those details are given for us. The downstairs guest rooms, the upstairs loft, whatever kind of facility it was to house these people was full and they were bedded down with the animals.

So there probably wasn't any kind of inn keeper who shut them out. It was just the nature of the situation. The tradition, as I said, goes back that this all happened in a cave, or that there was a cave nearby. This caused Helena, the mother of Constantine, to build a church on top of some cave that was presumed to be the site. If you go to Bethlehem today you will go to a church, you'll go into that church and it's a horrible place, frankly. It's an awful place full of smells and bells and hanging stuff and clutter and you wander down into this hole and there'll...there'll be a star in a hole and that's supposed to be the cave. That is not, of course, known by us. It's the traditional site that the church you see there today is not the one built by the mother of Constantine, it's the one built by Justinian. But the glitter and the trappings of that thing certainly wouldn't be anything like the stench and the smell and the odor, the crowd and all that was going on in the place where Joseph and Mary were.

When Jesus came into the world then He came in the most comfortless conditions, smelly, filthy. This is the wonder of grace though, isn't it? And this is part of the story that when God came down He came all the way down. "He thought His equality with God not something to be held onto but He gave it up and humbled Himself" and He humbled Himself all the way down, not just to a stinking stable but to become a substitute for stinking sinners and bear the stench of our guilt in His own body. He came down to the poor and the lowly and the humble and the base and the wicked. He came down to the common people to bring His glorious salvation. It was fitting, in a sense then, that He was born in a stinking, smelly stable because what was smelled far worse to the nostrils of God than the odor of animals is the odor of sinners. He sent the Savior all the way down into the lives of the lowly and the whole picture of that scene is a metaphor for the stench of sin which Jesus bore in His own body.

His little cloths wrapped and His little body must have collected the smell. It would have been the smell of animals, the stench of animals, the smell of fires burning in there to keep people warm, the smell of the humanity that milled around in that place, the filthiest place imaginable. Unthinkable entrance for the world...into the world for God's Son, sweat and pain and blood, coldness and manure and straw and odors; but He came all the way down to the stench of sin to bear in His own body our sins on the cross. And this was a picture and metaphor of the condescension of God. He came all the way down, all the way down, all the way down to the smell of a stable, all the way down to a smell...the smell of a sinner like you and like me. They had no room for Him then, they still don't have any room for Him.

The writer John says He was in the world, the world was made by Him, the world knew Him not. He came unto His own, His own received Him not. He came for sinners. He came all the way down to bear in His own body the wretched, wicked sin that belongs to us. The smelly stable was simply a metaphor for sin and its wretchedness. What a picture.

So we come from the world's setting to the national setting and the fulfillment of a Hebrew prophet's statement that He would be born in Bethlehem, all the way down to the circumstances of His birth which speak of His lowliness. He controls, does God, the great kings of the world. He fulfills the prophecies of Scripture and He comes all the way to the lowly sinner. Sovereign God, God of Scripture, God of the humble sinner, coming all the way down.

Well, it was in some ways a sad moment because of the obscurity of it all. But that didn't last. At that same time some angels began to tell what was going on to some shepherds, and we'll look at that next time.

Father, thank You for this wonderful, wonderful portion of Your great Word. We grieve that as the centuries have passed, the Savior has been treated pretty much in the same way. But we're also glad, Lord, that He came all the way down, all the way down to the wretched smell of a stable and even farther, far farther down to the wretched smell of a sinner. He came into the world, He came to the lowly and the humble and the base and the wicked, the vile to take our place on the cross and bear Your judgment on our sins. Oh what a wondrous scene it is. You control the great movements of history. You control the fulfillment of prophecy. You brought Your Son all the way down to touch the lives of wicked sinners. Thank You for this grace, this condescension, this salvation. Amen.

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