

For Your Sake

- Luke 2:1-7
- Preparing for large Christmas Eve family gathering, a mother had been giving out orders like a drill sergeant: "Pick up your things! Don't get your clothes dirty! Put away those toys." Well, her 4-year-old daughter had been underfoot all day, so she sent her to the next room to play with their wooden Nativity set.
As the mother scurried around setting the table she overheard her daughter talking to her toys with her mother's tone, saying: "I don't care who you are, get those camels out of my living room!"
- Matthew 1:18 says, "Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way..." He starts with Joseph, and the angel appearing to the man who was betrothed to be married to what he finds out to be a young lady expecting a baby that is not his. The angel tells Joseph who the baby is, and that Joseph shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins. Luke's gospel starts with Mary, and Gabriel's announcement to her that she would conceive a child and bear a son, "and you shall call His name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High." That's in chapter one, and now we read the story of the birth, and though it has been called the greatest miracle of all time, that God would enter His creation by becoming a man and being born of a woman, the story is told by Luke with no drama. He is restrained in the telling, giving us just a few details. What can we learn from this story of Christ's birth this Christmas? Or I should say, of what can we be reminded as we look at the story of Christ's birth this Christmas? I want to look at the birth today, in verses 1-7, and then next week, the birth announcement, in verses 8-14.
- The first thing we see is that Caesar Augustus decreed that all the world should be registered. Which meant that every household had to travel to "his own town." If this happened today, I would have to go to Winston-Salem to register. Some of you would have to travel much farther. By car. Or by plane. But since Joseph was from the house and lineage of David, he had to leave Nazareth, with Mary, his betrothed, who was expecting, and make the 90 mile journey through winding mountain trails to get to Bethlehem. On foot. That brings up some questions in our minds, doesn't it?
- Why Bethlehem? Well, the one big reason is that God keeps His promises. And He had spoken to the prophet Micah about this 700 years earlier and said, "But you, O 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 in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days." (5:2)
- Why Nazareth? I mean, why didn't God choose a woman in Bethlehem to be the mother of Jesus? And if it was Mary God wanted, then why didn't God have Mary born and raised in Bethlehem? Why Nazareth? You can look for yourself, but there is NO prophecy about Nazareth in the Old Testament. And when Philip told Nathanael years later that he had found the Messiah and He was from Nazareth, Nathanael spewed his mouthful of coffee and said, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"
- Why a census? Why a decree from the Roman emperor that everybody in the whole Roman world would have to go to the city of his or her ancestry? God had to get the mother to Bethlehem, but why make the whole Roman empire get up and go somewhere. Why not just have Joseph and Mary go home to be close to family for when this baby would be born?
- Why a "no vacancy" sign? Why did Mary have to give birth in a stable? John Piper wrote, "Now you would think that if God so rules the world as to use an empire-wide census to bring Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem, he surely could have seen to it that a room was available in the inn. Yes, he could have. And Jesus could have been born into a wealthy family. He could have turned stone into bread in the wilderness. He could have called 10,000 angels to his aid in Gethsemane. He could have come down from the cross and saved himself. The question is not what God could do, but what he willed to do."
- What have we got so far? Why Bethlehem, why Nazareth, why a census, why a stable? So, here's the best answer that I can come up with. Because He is God. Almighty God. He does what He wants,

and His ways are higher than ours, but He does nothing without divine purpose. He did all of this for two big reasons, with the first reason being preeminent. He did it for His glory. We will look at this more in the birth announcement next week, but what did the multitude of heavenly host say about this birth? "Glory to God in the highest!" That's what Christmas is about. The glory of God! That's why He sent His Son to earth. The glory of God! That's why He moved a Roman emperor to decree a census. The glory of God! That's why He sent wise men from the east to worship Him and lowly shepherds to be the first eye witnesses. The glory of God! That's why He is giving us another Christmas, another season to celebrate the greatest gift the world has ever received: the glory of God! In fact, that's why He has placed each one of us precisely where He has: the glory of God.

- For years Gordon MacDonald rode the same bus daily from his home to his church in New York City. One day the bus driver complained to MacDonald: "You've got it a lot better than me. You have an interesting job and travel different places. I just drive this bus up and down the same streets every day." MacDonald told the bus driver his job could be a Christian ministry too. "Every day, when you first get on this bus, before anyone else gets on, dedicate this bus to God for that day. Declare it to be a sanctuary for God for that day. Consecrate it to God's glory, and then act like it is a place where God dwells." Several weeks later MacDonald returned from a trip and saw the bus driver. "You've transformed my life," the man said. "I've been doing what you said every day, and it has made me see my job in an entirely new perspective."
- There's a second answer we could give to all of those "why" questions, especially the humble place of the Lord's birth. Why the contrast between Gabriel's message to Mary, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" and verse 7 of chapter 2, "there was no place for them in the inn." It was preeminently for God's glory. It was also for your sake. And my sake.
- Some of you college students just finished exams. Remember in your history class, especially, when you had to slog through 100 pages on one particular historical period, and you were looking for something to make sense of it all, a concise summary sentence that would help you understand? That's what we find in Paul's writing to the Corinthians as he is writing to encourage the Corinthians to become givers, and he writes something that is about that but is about so much more. Here it is, the summary statement about Jesus' birth:
- 2 Corinthians 8:9, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet **for your sake** He became poor, so that you by His poverty might become rich."
- Think about that verse with me for a few minutes. We know about grace, don't we? We sing about it and talk about it all the time. But do we understand what it means for us as individuals? Do you really KNOW the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ? You've heard the acronym for grace: God's Riches at Christ's Expense.
- Rich: was Jesus rich before He came to earth? Oh, incalculably so. He made the heavens and the earth and everything in it. In fact, He made everything that WAS made. And He lived in glory for eternity past. That's why Paul said He became poor, because no matter how Jesus had come to earth, no matter how He had been born and what kind of family He had been born into, the contrast between what He had left and what He came to is beyond comparison. Someone has suggested it would be like a man becoming a slug, but that doesn't do it, does it? He who was rich beyond our wildest imaginations became poor beyond anything we can think of. But don't feel sorry for Him! Or even worse, don't scold God for the way He sent Jesus to earth! Because the verse hinges on this phrase:
- For your sake. This is the key phrase. It was for your sake and mine that God co-opted the power of the Roman empire to get two little people, insignificant nobodies, to Bethlehem and to a stable so the Son of God could be born. He was born in a stable, not in a palace. He was laid in a feeding trough, not in a golden bassinet. And it was so that we, who are poor because of sin, might become rich. He was rich but made Himself poor. "For our sake He made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God." (2 Cor. 5:21) That's what it means to be poor: He was made to BE sin. That's what it means to be rich: we who were sinners were given grace to become the righteousness of God. That's what Christmas is all about. Receive the gift!

