

Sermon outline and notes prepared by:

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## Luke 2:1-7 “A Savior for a Troubled World”

Intro. As you live life, you can be sure that you will face problems. For example, many people live under an oppressive government. Mary & Joseph certainly did. The Roman Empire demanded heavy taxes from their subject nations to support the Roman army, & to support the wealthy lifestyle of the emperor & other leaders. If you did not pay your taxes, Roman soldiers could storm your house and take what they said you owe, even if it meant taking a family member away to be sold as a slave. To ensure that everyone paid their taxes, the Roman government required a census be taken every 14 years. Life was difficult under Roman oppression, even as it is difficult today as many people live under oppressive governments & heavy taxation.

Mary & Joseph illustrate other kinds of problems that we may face. Mary was pregnant even though she was only engaged. Even though we know she was pregnant by a miracle of God, most people in her village did not know it or believe it. I'm sure the tongues were wagging in the small town of Nazareth! Have you ever been slandered, or the object of cruel gossip? And when the government ordered the census, Mary & Joseph faced more problems. I'm sure as they traveled from Nazareth to Bethlehem to register for the census, they faced difficult travel. The picture that we have of Joseph walking, leading a donkey on which Mary was riding, is probably pretty accurate. They may have traveled from Nazareth over to the Jordan river, down the Jordan valley, and then up from Jericho to Jerusalem & on to Bethlehem. That last part of the trip was up a winding mountain road, followed by more hills & valleys. And poor Mary was very pregnant! Our travel conditions are much better, but most of us have experienced a breakdown or flat tire while traveling, or even a car wreck. When they arrived in Bethlehem they faced more problems. The village was crowded with other descendants of David. There was no room in the local inn. No one offered to let them stay in their home, even though Mary was great with child. The best they could find was an animal shelter of some kind. They experienced what many people in our world experience today: poverty, & difficult living conditions. And add to all that the fact that Mary faced the great pain & difficulty of childbirth without anesthesia. Now if you think *you* have problems, just consider what Mary & Joseph went through! Maybe your problems are not so bad after all.

But even though Mary & Joseph faced many problems imposed by others, I believe they understood that our greatest problem is our own sin. And God has taken action to save us from our sin. Notice in 1:47 that Mary called God “my Savior.” Yes, she was a sinner in need of a Savior! In vv.50 & 54 she extols the mercy of God. She understood that He is willing to be merciful to us sinners! In vv.54-55 she recognizes the fact that God promised salvation through the Messiah, and now has fulfilled that promise. And this morning we are going to read about the fulfillment of that promise in Bethlehem. We are going to see that God is the answer to the problems that you face, including the greatest problem of all, your sin. So let's look into our text together.

Now the first lesson I see from our story is this: when you face problems:

## I. TRUST IN THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD

This is one of the great doctrines of the Bible that every Christian should know. God works behind the scenes to influence the circumstances. Caesar Augustus was ruling on a human level, but God was the One who was really in charge. Let me show you how our text demonstrates the truth of the Providence of God.

Now in Micah 5:2 God had promised that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. Mary had been chosen to give birth to the Messiah. Yet we see in v.4 of our text that Joseph & Mary lived in Galilee, in the city of Nazareth. Now we would expect that Mary would give birth there in her home town, not 100 miles away in Bethlehem. So humanly speaking, we have a problem. But that was no problem with God. With God all things are possible. He is in ultimate control of human affairs. So what did God do to get Mary to Bethlehem? He used a decree from Caesar Augustus.

In v.1 we read, “And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered.” Caesar Augustus had his own reasons for ordering this decree. Since he was a methodical man and a good administrator, he ordered a census to be taken of the entire inhabited world (*oikoumene*, not *kosmos*). The Romans would then use the census as a basis for taxation. In v.2 we read that this was the first registration. In Acts 5:37 we read of another registration, which occurred in 6 A.D. The Romans had established that the registration would take place every 14 years. So the decree was probably originally issued in about 8 B.C., several years before Jesus was born. Most scholars believe that Jesus was actually born in 4 or 5 B.C.

No doubt this order created a problem for King Herod. Ever since the events recorded in 2 Samuel 24, the Jews were afraid of a census, and really resisted it based on biblical grounds. So even though the decree may have first gone out in 8 B.C., Herod may have received permission to delay the implementation of the decree until he had time to prepare Israel for the Census.<sup>1</sup> One thing that probably eased matters was that Herod directed a general registration to be made after the Jewish, rather than the Roman, manner. So this meant that all of the descendants of David went to Bethlehem. Evidently, Mary was also required to be registered. Have you ever wondered why she would have traveled all the way to Bethlehem, in her condition, had she not been required to do so? Besides, she was no doubt glad to get away from the stress of the gossip in Nazareth.

Now the Jewish accommodation was providential, for it caused Mary & Joseph to travel to Bethlehem for the census. And this delay was also providential, for the timing of the order coincided with Mary’s pregnancy & delivery. In fact, v.6 says, “So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered.” Once Joseph and Mary reached Bethlehem, she was in no condition to travel again until after she gave birth. So they stayed in Bethlehem until the child was born. Based on their lodging, I would assume that they arrived in Bethlehem only a few days before she gave birth.

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<sup>1</sup> The fact that a Pagan emperor and King Herod were involved in getting Joseph & Mary to Bethlehem is good evidence that this story is not a fabrication of Jewish legend. A counting of the people, or Census; and that Census taken at the bidding of a heathen Emperor, and executed by one so universally hated as Herod, would represent summation of all that was most repugnant to Jewish feeling. If the account of the circumstances, which brought Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem, has no basis in fact, but in a legend invented to locate the birth of the Nazarene in the royal City of David, it must be pronounced most clumsily devised.

So the first main lesson from this passage is the amazing providence of God. God controlled the circumstances in such a way that Mary & Joseph just happened to be in Bethlehem at the time she gave birth. Even so, Gal. 4:4 says, "But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law." Jesus was born at just the right time.

The lesson for us is that God is in control of our circumstances. According to Rom. 8:28, "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose" (KJV). And God can work in your circumstances to bring about good if you love God. God is not going to allow anything into your life that He cannot turn into some good in some way. Have you experienced the providence of God in your life recently?

During my 2 weeks in Indiana caring for my son, I witnessed several indications of the Providence of God. At a low moment I needed some Christian fellowship & encouragement. I went to a Baptist Church down the road. When I stopped by the church office, the pastor "happened" to be there. I introduced myself and he invited me into his office. He took at least 20 minutes of his time listening to me share the problems I was facing, and then he prayed a wonderful prayer with me. On another day I needed to get the 13 stitches removed from my finger. My daughter-in-law recommended a place. The doctor who was in that day just "happened" to have received her training from MCV hospital in Richmond. God could not have provided a better, more caring doctor for me that day. I'll give one more example. Andrew & I were having a disagreement regarding what he should do regarding his treatment. He just wouldn't listen to me at the time. Well, it so happened that the date was December 13. Andrew has a practice of reading a chapter from Proverbs each day. Guess how chapter 13 begins: "A wise son heeds his father's instruction..." I could give other examples. It's great to know that when you face problems, God is in control. He will meet your needs by His providence and works things out. Our God is omnipotent. He is a big God. You can trust Him during the difficulties of life.

Now the second lesson I want to share from our story is this: When you face problems:

## II. REMEMBER THAT GOD IDENTIFIES WITH OUR PROBLEMS

One problem that many people in our world have is poverty. Perhaps most of us have not experienced poverty, but some of you lived during the Depression. Others of you have experienced a season of poverty. Well Jesus became poor in order that the poor will have the comfort in knowing that Jesus personally knows what you're going through. 2 Cor. 8:9 says, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, that you through his poverty might become rich." One time a man came to Jesus and said, "Master, I will follow you wherever you go." Jesus reminded him of His poverty by saying, "The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of man has no place to lay his head." Most of the people of our world are poor in the material things of life. And Jesus demonstrated that He was willing to identify with most of humanity by assuming poverty in His own life. In fact, in Isaiah 61 we read that the Messiah would preach the gospel to the poor. And so it is fitting that Christ was born into poverty. Furthermore, the first proclamation of the fact that the Messiah had actually been born was made to poor shepherds (vv.8-12).

Now notice with me several indications of His poverty:

A. As Seen in the Place of His Birth – In v.7 we read, “And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger....” Now what is a manger? It is a feeding trough made of wood or stone. The child was not laid in a pretty bassinet, but in a feeding trough for animals. So evidently the baby was born in a place where animals were kept, not in a palace. It could have been a cave<sup>2</sup> or a stable constructed by man. All this spells poverty, deprivation.

Now our text explains the main reason why Jesus was born in such a lowly place, “because there was no room for them in the inn.” Since King David had so many children, there were plenty of descendants in Bethlehem. No wonder there was no room in the inn!<sup>3</sup> The inns of those days were often built around the four sides with an inner court. It generally had two stories. Those who stopped at the inn carried along their own blanket and pillow. On the ground floor were stables for the animals. It may have been in such a “stable” that Joseph and Mary found lodging when there was no longer any room in the “inn” proper, the second story. In fact, the word is used of an “upper room” at times.

Now if Joseph & Mary had been rich or famous, they would have made room for them somehow. Or someone would have opened their home to them. But Joseph was not rich enough to buy his way into a place to stay. He was just a poor Jewish carpenter. The owner of the inn should not be charged with cruelty. Room was simply lacking, except in the inn-stable.

Now this story at least illustrates one of the truths of Scripture: Jesus does not come where He is not invited. Jesus does not come where there is no room for Him. He is not going to force His way into your life. He says in Rev. 3:20, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me.”

Is there room in your heart & life for Jesus this Christmas? There are too many hearts which are too crowded with other things. Some are too busy pursuing money that they have no time for God. Too many are too busy pursuing sinful pleasure to have room from Christ. Is your life full of sin? Then you must repent of your sins, & prepare your heart to receive Him. So there are hearts that never welcome Jesus, not because they hate Him but simply because these hearts are already so overcrowded with thoughts of riches, honor, prestige, pleasures, business affairs, etc., that they have no room for Jesus.

Now we see that Jesus was poor as seen in the place of His birth. But there is another indication of His poverty:

B. As Seen in His Clothing – Again, v.7 says that she “wrapped Him in swaddling cloths.” The Greek word was used of strips of cloth that were used for bandages. The strips of cloth may have been used in combination with a small blanket, where the strips of cloth were wrapped around the baby to secure the blanket in place. Or, the baby may have been wrapped somewhat like a mummy! Again, notice the humility of this. He was not dressed in fine clothes. Would it have been fitting that the man who was to die naked on the cross should be robed in purple at His birth? And as Jesus was in His birth, so He was in His death. After Jesus was taken down from the cross, he was wrapped in linen clothes.

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<sup>2</sup> In fact, the belief that the travelers from Nazareth took up quarters “in a certain cave” dates all the way back to Justin Martyr (about 114-165).

<sup>3</sup> Now the word translated “inn” literally means “to loosen, unharness (the pack animals); hence, to rest, to take lodging for the night.”

So the story clearly reveals the fact the God's Savior was born into the most humble of circumstances. He was born to poor parents. Surely this points to the fact that Jesus is accessible to all. If Jesus had been born in a palace, He would be very difficult to get to. Who had access to the children of Charles and Diana when they were young? Few indeed, for they are royalty. We might tremble to approach a throne, but we cannot fear to approach a manger. So in the case of Jesus, even humble shepherds could approach him freely. Never could there be someone more approachable than Christ. No rough guards pushed poor petitioners away. There He lies in the manger, unguarded from your touch and unshielded from your gaze. The throne of Solomon might awe you, but the manger of the Son of David must invite you. Jesus later would say, "the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out" (John 6:37).

Now this leads to my last point. When you recognize your problems, and when you recognize your sin, then:

### III. TRUST IN THE SAVIOR GOD HAS SENT

Oh, how we need a Savior! Our story includes examples of faith & commitment to God, but it also includes examples of sin. We see an oppressive government. In Bethlehem it is likely that at least some people were guilty of selfishness. No one gave up their room or opened their home for a woman who was clearly soon to give birth. We clearly are sinners in need of a Savior. And God did not sit idly by doing nothing about our sin problem. He has not ignored the problems caused by sin, including violence, war, sickness, poverty, suffering, & death.

So after God brought Mary & Joseph to Bethlehem by His Providence, we read in v.7 that Mary "brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger." The context makes it clear that she gave birth to the Spirit-conceived, virgin born Son of God. And the angel announced to the Shepherds in v.11, "For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."

But was this baby the Messiah, God's anointed Savior from sin? The angel said in v.12 that there would be a sign that *this* babe was the promised Messiah, because the shepherds would find the babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger. Now there may well have been other newly born, swaddled babes in Bethlehem, but this was surely the *only* swaddled infant that was also lying in a manger. The sign was therefore definite and helpful. So on the one hand Jesus appeared to be just another baby born into humble circumstances. How perfectly human He was! And yet, intertwined with His humanity you could already sense that He was also divine, Christ the Lord!

Conclusion: On my way home Wednesday night I heard Pastor David Jeremiah tell the following story: She was fifteen, and he was seventeen when they met. They dated through high school and no one was surprised when they decided to marry after her graduation. But four years later, she found herself standing in the kitchen with a mound of dishes in the sink, two small children at her feet, and a pile of dirty diapers in the corner! Tears were streaming down her face. In what may well be viewed as a rash decision, she took off her apron, grabbed her coat, and walked out! When she called that night, her husband answered the phone. He was angry and worried. He tried not to let it show in his voice when he asked, "Where are you?" She seemed to ignore the question when she asked, "How are the children?" "Well, if you mean have they been fed, they have! I've just put them to bed and I'm wondering where you are and what you're doing." She hung up the phone, but it wasn't the last of her calls. She called once a week for the

next four months, and each time, her husband would plead with her to come home. He would tell her the kids loved her and missed her and needed her, and wanted her to come home to be with them! But each time the conversation turned to her whereabouts, she hung up!

Finally, the young husband could stand it no longer! He took their savings and hired a private detective to find his wife. It didn't take long for the professional to track her down to a third-rate motel on the sleazy side of Des Moines, Iowa. The young man borrowed money from his in-laws, bought a plane ticket, and flew to Des Moines. He flagged down a cab and drove to the motel. He climbed the stairs to his wife's room on the third floor. With his hands trembling, doubt in his eyes, and sweat pouring down his face, he knocked on her door. When his wife came out, he forgot the speech he had prepared and simply said, "We love you so much! Won't you please come home?" She fell into his arms and the two went home together that very night.

A week later, the dishes were done, the children were in bed, and husband and wife sat in the living room by the fire. He finally mustered the courage to ask her what had haunted him for so long. "Why didn't you come home when we told you, over and over again, we loved you? And what made you change your mind?" He needed to know. She answered, "Because when we spoke on the phone...those were only words. But then you came for me!"

Long ago, the human race turned our backs on our Creator and "walked out" to try life on our own! We took off as prodigal sons and daughters. Since that day God has tried to win us back, to bring us home, by giving His law & religious rituals. He even threatened us through angry prophets ...but it just wasn't working! He wasn't getting through to us! Then God, who loved us so, went beyond words to action! He came to us! He sacrificed the joys and glories of heaven & came here to us...to this earth...as one of us! He was even willing to be born in a stable for animals, and laid in a feeding trough. And if this doesn't tell you something profound about God, nothing will! God would stop at nothing to bring us home! This is the wonder and mystery of the Christmas story...God came for us!

Will you now turn from your sin and selfishness & come home to God? He loves you so much that He even suffered and died to save you from your sin. There may be some Christians here today who have strayed from God. Look once again at the Christ child, lying in a manger. God proved His love by coming to us. So this Christmas, come home!

Sources: Robert Dean, *Layman's Bible Book Commentary*, Vol. 17 (Nashville: Broadman, 1983); Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971); Virtus E. Gideon, *Luke: A Study Guide Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1967); William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Luke* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978); Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1961); Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, Vol. 9 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977 reprint); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 4 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1983); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible [CD-ROM]* (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996); A.T. Robertson, *New Testament Word Pictures, Vol. 14* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1931); Charles H. Spurgeon, *12 Christmas Sermons* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1976 reprint), 19ff [25G.41]; Warren W. Wiersbe, "*Be*" Series: *New Testament Volumes 1 & 2, Luke* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1989). Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).