

Finding Hope in the Christmas Story, Part 2

Luke 2:1-7

Three reasons for hope this Christmas: divine sovereignty, tender providence, and perfect redemption. At a high level, overarching everything, is divine sovereignty. Down in the details, the day to day of where we live, there's a tender providence. And, undergirding it all, and getting to the profound and deepest issues of need is a perfect redemption. Three reasons to find hope in the Christmas story.

Second point to see this Christmas, we can find hope in, number two: The tender providence we see in the Christmas story. Says there, in Luke 2:6-7, that "...while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn."

Much has been made of that last phrase that there was no place for them in the inn, as though the, the Bethlehemites were

inhospitable to this young couple. That's probably not quite right. It's quite likely that Joseph, in his planning and preparation for the journey, he probably made arrangements to stay with a friend or family member there in Bethlehem during that time. But one commentator suggests that this person's guest chamber, that's the word for inn, *katalyma*, guest chamber; it's translated, inn, like it's a lodging, a hotel, or something like that, but it's actually a guest room; it's probably occupied when he and Mary arrived. Joseph had to make different accommodations.

But it's Justin Martyr, who wrote in the second century, who most influences our imagination about this scene. He's the reason that we have on our Hallmark cards, Mary, Joseph, all the animals and everything in a cave, or something like that. He writes this, "When the child was born in Bethlehem, since Joseph could not find a lodging in that village, he," took his, "took up his quarters in a certain cave near the village. And, while they were there, Mary brought forth the Christ, and placed him in a manger. And here, the Magi, who came from Arabia, found him." End quote.

That's why our nativity scenes, our songs, Christmas pageants, and all the rest, our traditions, they picture the holy family sleeping in this inhospitable, cold, dank cave, surrounded by barnyard animals, attended by shepherds, and visited by wisemen all at the same time. And we know that the Magi visited them as much as maybe two years later in a rented house; it's a detail that Justin's obviously mistaken about. So, it's probably time to clear Bethlehem's reputation a little bit, that they do care for travelers and pregnant women out in the cold.

It's commentator James Edwards, he paints a slightly warmer picture for us. He writes this, "The footprint of a typical first-century Palestine dwelling was a rectangle divided into three spaces: a large, central room with a stable for animals on one end, and a guest room," which is the word *katalyma*, "on the other end." *Katalyma*, the word translated an, inn, there, verse 7, is talking about one of those spaces in the rectangle of the, of the typical home. "All three rooms had separate entrances. The *Katalyma* was an attached guest room separated from the central room by a solid wall. Then the stable was separated from the central room by a half wall, thus allowing the family to feed animals without going outdoors.

“So, when Joseph and Mary arrived in Bethlehem, the guest rooms in the homes were already occupied, and hence, the newborn Jesus was swaddled and placed in a manger.” Manger’s “within sight, sound, reach of the central room, despite improvised arrangements. Middle Eastern hospitality, then as now, would’ve ensured that Mary, Joseph, and Jesus were properly cared for.”
End quote.

The evidence that I’ve read and seen squares well with that explanation. And the picture that that provides for us of a large house, the, the *katalyma* is taken, it’s occupied, but there is a central room, and then a the half wall, with the stable and the animals on the other side, it actually creates a much warmer picture. Reconciles the scene more accurately, accurately, really, with the tender providence of God, that God took care of Joseph and Mary. He tended to their needs. There’s no need to burden them further with imaginative traditions and all that on our part. Mary gave to her firstborn son, yes, in, in humble means and humble circumstances, but it was reasonably comfortable and warm in private accommodations.

So, when Jesus is born, and here's a, a point of providence that I want you to see most clearly, is how Mary's motherly instincts immediately kicked into high gear, here. This is another mark of tender providence as God provides for his beloved son, Jesus, in very practical, intimate ways. Two verbs, there, that demonstrate God's tender providence at work very clearly, verse 7, first Mary swaddled her son, and then second, she laid him in a manger. She wrapped him tightly with cloths and then she put him to bed, she laid him down.

Every mother understands this scene, this picture. Every grandmother cherishes that time to swaddle that newborn baby and put him to bed. Joseph and Mary here, are relatively comfortable and finding rest after a long journey, they're settled there, in the room, and next to the stable, as the brand-new parents. They are rejoicing, as brand-new parents do, in precious life, priceless moments with their son. They're admiring Jesus' perfectly formed fingers, as all parents do; kiss those perfect cheeks, respond in wonder to every coo and every cry. Like every child, parents wonder at this little creature who's been fearfully, wonderfully made, knit together in his mother's womb.

Before tucking Jesus in for his first outside-the-womb nap, tells us that Mary swaddled him. That is to say, she bound him tightly in swaddling cloths, wrapped him up. It's one of those details in the nativity, it's become so familiar to us we tend to pass it by rather quickly without thinking too much about it. But we do need to ask: why does Luke tell us this? Why does he provide this little bit of detail? Seems mundane, ordinary. Why the detail about Mary swaddling her son? Swaddling a baby is kind of important, actually. Obviously, swaddling keeps the baby warm for the first few days of life, until his internal thermometer starts to kick in. So, swaddling is controlling his temperature.

Swaddling keeps the baby calm. That transition from the tight, closed in, confined environment of a womb to this open, expansive world outside the womb, that's traumatic and upsetting. Swaddling helps with that transition. It keeps the baby calm, the warm and calm baby is a baby who sleeps better longer. And when the baby sleeps, momma sleeps. And when momma sleeps, everybody's happy, right? So, all of that warmth, calm, protection, rest, growth, development, it's packed into those two verbs, there, as Luke tells us that Mary swaddled her baby and then laid him to rest in a manger.

This baby, although he's conceived by the miraculous power and intervention of the Holy Spirit, this baby is a human baby in every way. He's human in every way. He's dependent on his mother. He'd die without her. He needs her comfort, her protection, her care, like any other human baby. He's weak, he's vulnerable, he's dependent, he needs to grow. All that is evidence of Jesus' true humanity. Don't miss the fact that God's tender providence saw to it that Jesus entered into the world by being born into a family; nurturing care of a mother, Mary, as well as the instructing, providing, protecting care of his earthly father, Joseph.

This family was essential; provided for his needs, protected him from harm. In fact, it says in Matthew chapter 2, verses 14 and 15 tell us that Joseph had to bundle up that family in a hurry after the visit of the wise men, the Magi. Had to travel to Egypt to escape the murderous search of the wicked king Herod. God works his great and sovereign purposes at a high, high level, in ways that boggle the mind, in ways that are too great for us to understand. But he never fails to do his will in a tender, and careful, and considerate way, attending to

the most intimate of details, conducting us along the path by his kind and considered providence. We need to remember that, don't we? Every day we need to remember that; especially when we're living through troubled times. We can be filled with hope.

And as Christians, we must be filled with hope, knowing that all the big things are directed by his powerful and sovereign hand. We're filled with hope, knowing that all the little things, too, all the small, but very important things to us, very important details of our lives, they're guided in his wisdom by his kind and tender providence. We see that in the Christmas story as well.

So, we find hope in divine sovereignty and tender providence on display in the Christmas story. I had one final point that we can find hope in. Going from the high level down to the low, intimate level, now we go to the deepest spiritual level in this third point. Perfect redemption in the Christmas story. And, if we didn't add this point, well, it'd just be a story about providence and sovereignty, but, really, where does it impact us eternally? Where does our redemption come? We can

go pretty much any place in Scripture, you can throw a dart at any page and it's talking about God's redemption.

Salvation of God visited Earth here though, in the birth of Jesus Christ. In this text, we really do find all we need to understand the significance of this birth, see the redemption of God. God sovereignly directed all of this. His providence shepherded all of this so that God would accomplish his purpose, Luke 1:77, "...to give," the, "knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins." Just to show you this a little bit, turn in your Bibles to the book of Micah. Go back to the book of Micah so you can see where this prophecy of his birth in Bethlehem, Micah 5:2, where this originated, some of its surrounding context, as well. Because that's what's really interesting, is this surrounding context. Micah 5:2 says, "But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah," you're, "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."

Now, the ESV says, "from ancient days," but, it's actually the word *olam*. And other translations, I think, get this more

accurately when they render that *olam* “from eternity.” His coming forth is from old, comma, from eternity. In other words, this is no mere human ruler. There’s something unique and special about him. This ruler has a divine nature. He shares an eternity. He’s from before time began. He’s from eternity, which means he is eternal, and eternality is a, an attribute of deity.

It’s absolutely critical that God accomplish his sovereign will, that his providence conduct the family, the young family from Nazareth to Bethlehem in time for the birth of Jesus, because everyone needed to turn their attention to Micah’s prophecy and do a little reading, which is what we’re going to do. For those who didn’t stop at Micah 5:2 in that day, like king Herod, when he discerned from his scholars the birthplace of the Messiah, he stopped at Micah 5:2, didn’t go any further, didn’t read any context. If we keep on reading, if we take an interest in the context of Mic, Micah’s prophecy, this is what we’d see.

Notice God’s standard of righteousness, there, in Micah 6:6-8, “With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt

offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" He's, "told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" Hmm. Doing justice, that's external conformity to the law of God. That's doing what is good, and what, speaking what is good and right with our lips, doing what is good and right in our behavior. That's on the outside. That's what everybody can see; whether or not we are conforming externally to the righteousness revealed in the law of God.

But it goes internal. "To love kindness," that is to have a heart of good toward our fellow man; toward God and our fellow man. "To walk humbly with our God," that's to live in submission to him. It's to live in obedience to God's revealed Word. And these are matters of, of internal conformity to what is good; a righteousness that is internal, that comes from the heart, and comes out to the outside in a way that everybody can see. Well, that's the standard. What's to be done about it? Because we can't give offerings and burnt offerings and sacrifices, and thousands of rivers of oil, which is costly. In fact, we can't

even give what is precious and dear to us, like “the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul.” So, what’s to be done? Look at Micah chapter 7, verses 7-9, and see that the heart of faith doesn’t look to itself, it looks to the salvation in God.

“But as for me, I will look to the Lord; I will wait for the God of my salvation; my God will hear me. Rejoice not over me, my enemy; when I fall, I shall rise; when I sit in darkness, the Lord will be a light to me. I will bear the indignation of the Lord because,” I’ve, “sinned against him, until he pleads my cause and executes judgment for me. He will bring me out to the light; I shall look upon his vindication.”

I’m not fond of that word, vindication, in the ESV. It’s the word *setika*, which should be translated, righteousness, here. And he’s saying, I shall look upon his righteousness. He’s not just looking for vindication for himself. He knows that he bears the indignation of the Lord, justly so, because, verse 9, “I have sinned against him.” But he waits in hope. He knows that it must be God. God, who does act as the omniscient prosecutor, taking him to court, taking him before law, having him stand before God, who is the righteous judge. If he has any hope of

acquittal, any hope of justification, God the prosecutor must turn around and become to him God the advocate. That's what he longs for, there.

God must plead my cause. He must execute judgement not against me, but for me. And then, and only then, shall I look upon his righteousness, a righteousness that is not my own, but a righteousness that is one that comes from God on the basis of faith. It's an external righteousness, what the reformers called an alien righteousness. Alien, because it's outside of us. It's strange, it's foreign to us, it's a righteousness we so desperately need because none of us have it. But God has it. God is righteous. And I, with his advocacy for me, I shall look upon his righteousness. And then God can be both "just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus," Romans 3:26. When that happens, and precisely because of God's saving work through this promised child, the prophet can rejoice. He finds hope.

Look at, end of that chapter, chapter 7, Micah 7:18-19. "Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in steadfast love.

He will again have compassion on us; he will tread our iniquities underfoot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea." What's he talking about? Expiation. Separating the sinner from his sin so that the sinner is no longer called a sinner, but called a saint, because his sins are gone, cast from him, separated from him.

Well, how can God do that? How can God, who is a perfectly just judge, how can he pardon our sin and still be considered in any way just? If you go before a judge, plead a grievance before him; someone committed a crime, broke into your house, stole all your stuff, killed your dog, killed your cat, whatever; you go before the judge, they've caught him, you had him on camera, you catch him and you go before the judge and the judge says, I know this guy, coached him in little league. Let's let him go. He's a pretty good dude. This was an anomaly in his life." You would cry injustice, and rightly so.

We expect a perfectly just judge to be perfectly just, to not let one sin go, to not cast any sin into the depths of the sea. I mean, why would we expect God to do this? How can he pass over transgression for anyone? Still be considered righteous.

Isn't that the height of unrighteousness, to pass over transgression? The answer comes in the substitutionary atonement of the sin-bearing Christ, the child born in Bethlehem.

Turn back to Luke chapter 2. We're going to look at one more detail, here. Verse 7, we already noted that after Jesus was born, we saw that Mary, she wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger. Notice the elements, there. She wrapped him in bands of cloth, laid him in a manger. Jesus is helpless there, a vulnerable human baby. Subject to the care of his mother, he is dependent upon her to take care of a body that he had no real power or control over. He's wrapped in bands of cloth, laid in a manger; four things there.

We find him in that same condition at the end of Luke's Gospel. Turn to the end and look at Luke 23. End of the chapter of Luke 23, in verse 53. Jesus has been crucified. He's been put to death on the cross. He called out with a loud voice, committed his spirit into the hands of his father, and then, he, by his own decision, gave up his breath. He chose the very moment that he would die. And after Jesus died, Luke tells us that Joseph of Arimathea, he was a member of the Sanhedrin,

secretly though for fear of the Jews, but he came and became a bold believer; he asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Pilate consented. So, Joseph went up to Golgotha, records this, Luke 23:50 and following, went up to Golgotha, the hill, took down the body off the cross in order to prepare it for burial.

Once again, you see that the body of Jesus is there, dependent, in a helpless condition. And it says there, verse 53, "He took it down, wrapped it in a linen shroud, laid him in a tomb cut in stone." Again, his body wrapped in linen, laid, this time, not in a manger, but in a tomb. Those two verses, Luke 2:7, Luke 23:53, exactly parallel. First, it's a capable mother, and then a capable man. First, it's the careful attention of a tender mother, and then it's the careful attention of a loyal man. Both of them wrapping his helpless body in linen, both of them confining that body in swaddling cloth, both of them doing so in order to lay his body to rest.

How can God, the perfectly just judge, how can he pardon sin and remain just? How can God pass over transgression, still be considered righteous? Because this baby, son of Mary, son of God, because this one who's coming forth is from old, from

eternity, because this perfect one who always does what is good, both externally doing justice, always doing what is right, and internally loving kindness, walking humbly before his God, this one who is perfect, sinless, flawless, the spotless lamb of God, this one gave his life as an atonement for our sins, that whoever believes should not perish but have everlasting life.

At his birth, Jesus was laid in a manger, a newborn baby, tender life; that's God's gift of a miraculous life, God's gift of a savior. At his death, Jesus was laid in a tomb, a dead body, lifeless and cold, which is God's gift of an atoning substitute, a sacrifice for our sins. Why did he die? "God made him who knew no sin," 2 Corinthians 5:21, "to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him."

Such hope we find in the Christmas story. The high level, cosmic level of God's sovereignty, at the near and imminent level of the lives that we live every single day, we find hope there, too. But most of all we find hope in the perfect redemption of our God, who loves us, and gave up his son for us, that we might live for him. That's what we get to rejoice this, in this Christmas and find hope in this Christmas.