

Trusting God in the Christmas Story, Part 2

Luke 1:1-2:20

Go ahead and turn in your Bibles to Luke chapter 2:1. The Scripture says, "In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth to Judea, to the city of David which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son, wrapped him swaddling cloths and laid him a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

"And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. And the angel said

to them, 'Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.'

"And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!' And the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.' And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. When they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. You can stop there.

Mary trusted God through the questions of the Christmas story. Not everything was revealed to her. There were some

things that were left unknown. And Mary trusted God through the questions that came through the Christmas story. For every fact that Mary believed, there was a corresponding difficulty that came upon her. Significant difficulty, by the way. Every fact would not only test her faith in believing the fact itself, in taking God at his word, but also in believing God in the outworking of his promises, the outworking of his plan, and especially as it dealt with her personally. You have to realize all of this was quite traumatic for Mary physically, emotionally, relationally, socially. When God's grace came upon her, it meant some serious, serious disruption on her life.

From conception to childbirth, everything in between, she had walked a very difficult road. It had, no doubt, raised questions for her, especially as she's recovering here from childbirth. These gruff shepherds burst into the room to give their report. But we need to go back to the opening set of facts that she embraced starting with her conception. Mary was betrothed to Joseph. She's in a legal covenant, which was as binding then as marriage. You break that covenant through infidelity, you risked stoning. You break that covenant; it took a divorce if it was a legitimate reason. It was a binding

covenant. So Mary here rested in Joseph's covenant love. She rested in his good intentions, in his character, in his righteous concern for her. She rested in his undying commitment to provide for her and to protect her.

The two of them together, they conducted themselves in a righteous way, so there was no guilt or shame before God at all. But it's precisely because of that righteous set of circumstances, because of this very situation that the trial this young couple faced together was a such a severe test of faith. It was precisely because of their godliness that the stress and the tension increased. And that was by God's designed. All of this served to strengthen and increase Mary's faith.

In light of the facts that Mary had believed, virgin conception, the nature of this child in her womb, the revelatory words that came from Elizabeth her relative, from her husband Zechariah, even from her own mouth, the implications begin to mount after Luke 1:56. If you'll notice it says there, "Mary remained with Elizabeth about three months." That's enough time for Elizabeth to give birth to her son, John. "She remained

about three months and returned to her home.” Okay, so once Mary returned home, she’s about three months pregnant. She started to live out the implications of what has been revealed to her. And here’s a short list of questions that begin to pile up in Mary’s mind. Questions that challenge her faith, that challenge the faith of this young couple.

First of all, when Mary returned home, as I said, when she gets back from Elizabeth’s house, in that visit, she’s about three months pregnant. Would she tell Joseph, or not? That’s the first test. Would he believe her when she tells him? What would happen with that relationship? That’s not easy for a young pregnant girl to consider. Well, she told him. That created another set of tensions, a whole new trial. Because Joseph heard Mary’s news that she’s three months pregnant and, oh by the way, it’s by miraculous conception, Joseph. By the Holy Spirit! So is he going to believe her story? It’s consistent with her character. Or would he believe contrary to her character that she had been unfaithful to him.

We read earlier from the account of Jesus’ birth recorded in Matthew’s Gospel Joseph was inclined to believe Mary. And

that created another trial for him. What would he do about this? What was he gonna do? Once people started to notice Mary was pregnant, people would talk. Assumptions would be made. Accusations would begin to surface, would begin to surface, would begin to be voice, talked about, whispered about, even audibly mentioned. The purity of their relationship would be called into question. The purity of Mary herself.

Matthew 1:19, acknowledges the mental anguish Joseph was going through. It says there, "Joseph, being a just man unwilling to put her to shame, he resolved to divorce her quietly." He just wanted to take care of this in a quiet way, protect her dignity as much as possible. Joseph's anguish there represented there in Matthew chapter 1, that had to be rivaled by nobody else except Mary herself. I mean, think of her. Think of what she was about to endure. She had to be heartsick at the tension that this was creating for her dear Joseph. She didn't want that. She didn't want him to have to fight against this suspicion. But an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream. He resolved part of that tension for him confirming Mary's good character, telling him in Matthew 1:20, "Don't fear to take Mary

as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.”

Okay, it's exactly as she said. Good. So when Joseph awoke from sleep, verse 24, “he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife.” And he did that very, very quickly, too. Verse 25, though, hints at another tension. “He knew her not until she had given birth to a son.” They endured that bit of trial as well. They did that righteously. No physical consummation of the marriage. This baby, growing in Mary's womb. The due date is only about four or five months away. People are eventually gonna do the math. When they do talk, they'll tend to impugn their good character. They'll be suspicious. And if they heard the explanation, perhaps they'd be offended about involving the Holy Spirit in this, what appears to be an unrighteous situation.

Even worse if they heard Mary's claim that she is the very virgin spoken of in Isaiah 7:14. Who does she think she is? But God had taken care of that, as well. We read in Luke 2:1 and following, God had already been ordering all things by his good providence. The census decree by Caesar Augustus, the

administration of the census by Quirinius in the region of Herod's client kingdom, that district.

Joseph had a legitimate reason to leave, to get down to Bethlehem, to get his pregnant wife out of Nazareth, away from all those curious friends and neighbors. All the family members to enter into Bethlehem with some degree of anonymity. But again, that created yet another tension for her, another trial for the young couple. Because Joseph, in a very difficult time, had to plan an unscheduled trip right during winter. And rather hastily.

Added to the challenge of this, the logistics there are the needs of a very pregnant, increasingly uncomfortable wife. Joseph obviously wanted to care for Mary. He loved her. At first, he wanted to make sure she's protected and comfortable on the journey, but also, he wants to provide for her along the way, taking care of all of her needs. But then to make sure they're well-situated once they arrive. So after making this arduous, tedious journey, the young couple arrives to find the room unavailable. Whatever arrangements he'd made had fallen



through. And he has to get his pregnant wife situated in a stable. Okay. Not the way you want to start your young marriage.

This is gonna test this young marriage, especially when she's anticipating labor and childbirth, which, you guessed it, adds another level of tension and trial to the story. As I said, childbirth is traumatic. And if there's ever a time in a young first-time mother's life where she wants her family close by, where she wants her mother to be there to accompany her, they're far, far away. Mary is not in her own home. She's in unfamiliar surroundings. She's probably quite lonely, but at this point, she'd been through a level of trial and testing that few of us can really understand. Physically, emotionally, relationally, socially, she has been stretched and pressed.

And finally, everything seems to be settling down. The trauma of the childbirth is over. She's gone through the pain. The baby given to her in her arms. She's looking at the baby. She swaddles him, cleans him, sets him down to rest quietly in a manger. And it's in those quiet hours she's disturbed yet again. In comes this excited troop of rough-cut shepherds. And they

barge right in to share their news, along with half the town, it would seem to her. Like, Who are all these people?

It may not seem that that was very helpful for Mary at the time. But God had ordained that this is the very thing she needed to hear. The confirmation to the shepherds who came in that day to see this baby wrapped in swaddling cloths lying in a manger. That was their confirmation. That was the sign to them. But you know the confirmation to Mary was what they shepherds said to her. Prior to the shepherds' arrival as Mary's recovering in that stable, taking in all the ambiance. She's considering what lays ahead.

If it hadn't hit her already, the reality was starting to settle in on her about now. Before the shepherds arrive, she's looking at her baby. She's looking at this promised child that's resting in an animal's feeding trough. And it's a reminder to her of their temporal poverty; how in the world are we gonna provide for this baby? This is the Messiah! What?! I can't give him a better birth than...I can't give him a better living than this. Joseph, what are you gonna do? How many, how many tables

and chairs and stuff can you make to provide well for this baby?"

As she looked around, saw her loving, but very young husband, the two of them surrounded by animals. There's no family. There's no friends. It was a palpable loneliness that had to set in for her. Who's gonna help us raise this baby? Who are we to raise the Messiah? Who's gonna help? The words of Gabriel nine months earlier had to be rattling around in her head. "Greetings, O favored one. The Lord is with you; don't be afraid, Mary, you found favor with God." Elizabeth told her, "Blessed are you among women."

She's not one to complain, Mary. But having just given birth to her firstborn child, surrounded by animals in a stable, it's a complete reminder of her poverty, paltry means, far from family and friends. She's in an unfamiliar town. She's reminded of their absolute isolation, loneliness. She probably wasn't feeling very favored. She probably wasn't feeling very blessed. This didn't seem to be going according to expectations. All she had to hold onto was what? The promise of God. Was that enough? You know sometimes, we in much less way than this, but we can

struggle with unmet expectations, as well, right? It's on a smaller scale, but it can be just as real for us. Just as painful when things don't work out. It would be hard to believe in light of unmet expectations, or when our expectations are denied altogether. Be hard to remain steadfast and unmoved when we face things we don't fully understand.

You know God doesn't apologize for any of that and why would he. His plan is always perfect. His ways are always wise. And his character remains, always remains as it has always been, gracious and faithful and full of tender mercy. Even when things aren't making sense, God calls us to believe in him. In spite of how things seem, in spite of the things we don't fully understand. God wants us to trust him, particularly when things don't make sense.

It's not about things working out according to our expectations. It's not about our comfort. It's not about getting what we want for Christmas. It's not about getting what we want out of life. All of this, the good, the bad, everything in between, it's about us getting God. It's about deepening our relationship with the eternal God. It's about learning his ways.

It's about discovering and understanding his will, which is revealed to us in Scripture.

It's about us joining his program, rather than trying to cajole him and manipulate him into getting into our program. This "good news of great joy which shall be for all kinds of people," that's good news for only one kind of person: the person that wants God and nothing else out of life. Those who are under divine grace, they are the one Luke 2:14, "with whom God is pleased." Those are the one upon whom his favor rests. Mary is one of those people for whom God is enough. Is God enough for you?

In the midst of all the challenges Mary has faced, God has been gracious to send her, through these shepherds a reminder. He's still at work. Everything is continuing according to his plan. And that's what happened when the shepherds arrived that first Christmas morning. Like Mary, we also need to trust God in the midst of the questions of the Christmas story. Or the questions of God's plan. We believe the facts he's revealed. We trust him to walk us through the variables, the uncertainties of

life because at the heart of it all is the reward of knowing him. That's the point.

That's not possible apart from the child of the Christmas story. Mary trusted God through the child of the Christmas story. Mary and Joseph went through this whole process together, but they were virtually alone. They had no one to share the experience with. And so God graciously remedied that. He didn't send familiar faces, though. He didn't send friends and neighbors. He didn't send family members. God sent strangers. Some shepherds from the fields surrounding Bethlehem. The comfort he provided for Mary that day, it wasn't the relational comfort she might have hoped for, a familiar face, physical comfort, material. God sent her theological comfort. God sent her doctrine. God sent her truths for her mind, for her heart to embrace and believe.

Take a look at Luke 2:8 and flowing through verse 14. It's most likely that Luke obtained the material to write this entire section as he was conducting his thorough research, it's most likely he obtained this material from Mary herself. It's so significant to Mary, she wrote it down. Luke 2:8 to 14 says, "In

the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, the glory of the Lord shone around them, they were filled with fear. The angel said to them, 'Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.' Suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of heavenly host praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased.'"

After hearing that report, did anything change in Mary's temporal circumstances? Nope, not a thing. Did she suddenly receive a windfall of money? Publisher's Clearing House, Internet Jackpot, something like that? No! Some avenue of means to provide for her baby? Nope. Apparently, the shepherds didn't even help her find another place to stay. She remained in the same temporal situation. And yet, everything had improved for her. God had sent these shepherds to her as an independent verification of the truth. Everything she heard from Gabriel

nine months ago, what she saw and heard in the presence of Elizabeth and Zechariah, all of it is confirmed by these lowly, humble shepherds. They had nothing else to contribute to her, except the truth. And that was everything.

Folks, that's the grace of God. Caring for this young girl, strengthening her faith, strengthening her grip on his promises. And for a believing heart, that silences all questions. That removes all dark shadows of doubt because the light is shining through once again. And notice, this truth, it's all focused and centered on one subject: a child. This comfort is Christ-centric. This comfort is Christ-centered. The good news of great joy is for all the people and it's about a Savior who's Christ the Lord. Look, questions about the means to provide, questions about the relational support that they needed to raise this Messiah; even theological support, even doctrinal support, even though those questions all remained, even though they were not immediately answered, Mary needed to trust God to provide the answers. And God did.