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The Birth of Jesus Christ, Part 4

Luke 2:4-7

November 15, 2015

Open your Bibles to Luke Chapter 2. Let's begin just by reading the passage. We're just going to read the short section from verses 1 to 7. "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." Or he was governing in 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 and wrapped him in the swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn."

So as news of this census decreed by Caesar Augustus several years earlier, as the news reached Nazareth, as the agents of Quirinius influenced Herod to disseminate this registration instruction, this gave Joseph the opportunity that

he needed to leave Nazareth with no suspicion at all. They were able to discretely leave town. Joseph was able to protect his wife's good reputation. So, in the midst of some very human circumstances, motivated by very human concerns, God worked out his will through the free exercise of Joseph's will. Joseph chose to submit to the government. He chose to care for his wife, and all that was exactly as the Lord had planned. In that way, God strategically provided for Jesus to be born in Bethlehem, the city of David, exactly as he prophesied and there's significance to that as well.

So Joseph and Mary, eager to get out of Nazareth before the signs of her prenuptial pregnancy are obvious, they start on their journey south to Bethlehem. Two basic routes they could have taken. The shortest route was directly from Nazareth, right across the valley below to their south, straight through Samaria following a trade route. It was also the most rugged route, not easy for a pregnant wife, and it also took them through the unpleasant land of the Samaritans. The longer route would have crossed through the mountains to Canaan to the East, descended to the southern shores of Galilee and from there, they would likely rendezvous with other travelers who were heading south as well because it was safer to travel in groups. Joseph would have prepared for all of this. Head south through the Jordan Rift

Valley. That was the flattest route, easier going for Mary. It was a well-worn path frequented by travelers, less likely to fall victim to bandits along the way. Still, it's quite a journey.

The overall descent from Nazareth to Galilee was about 2,200 feet. And then the walk along the Jordan River wasn't bad, but then there was a significant ascent from the Dead Sea, which is, by the way, 1,400 feet below sea level, imagine that, to go from there up to Jericho and then farther still to Jerusalem, which was perched at 2,300 feet. That's a total climb of 3,700 feet. People in the first century they were more robust than we are, used to walking long distances. No one needed a gym membership back then. But imagine, ladies, making that kind of a climb while pregnant. I'm just guessing that's not pleasant. Just a suspicion on my part because I've never had to do it, but the whole trip here would have taken nearly a week on foot. Maybe even longer. Camping on the ground. Exposed to the winter weather elements with its cool temperatures, likelihood probability of rain at least. Not the ideal time for a pregnant woman to go camping.

Alfred Edersheim paints the picture of their travel quite well. This is what he says, "Although passing through one of the warmest parts of the country, the season of the year must, even

in, most favorable circumstances, have greatly increased the difficulties of such a journey. A sense of rest and peace must, almost unconsciously, have crept over the travelers when at last they reached the rich fields that surrounded the ancient 'House of Bread,'" which is the literal meaning of Bethlehem, House of Bread, "and passing through the valley, ascended through the terraced vineyards and gardens. Winter though it was, the green and silvery foliage of the olive might, even at that season, mingle with the pale pink of the almond, nature's early waker. And with the darker color of the opening peach buds, the chaste beauty and sweet quiet of the place would recall memories of Boaz, of Jesse, and of David. So with a sense of relief, the travelers would turn from the sight of Herod's castle perched at a high point there. Through the break of the hills eastward the heavy molten surface of the Dead Sea, the Sea of Judgment would appear in view; westward wound the road to Hebron; behind them lay the valleys and hills which separated Bethlehem from Jerusalem and concealed the Holy City. But for the present such thoughts," writes Edersheim, "would give way to the pressing necessity of finding shelter and rest."

Jerusalem and Bethlehem were only separated by six miles. And yet there were hills in between them. Having considered the strategic concerns, let's consider a second aspect of God's

provision here. It's God's practical provision for Jesus. Down in Bethlehem, they're tucked away from some of the turmoil and chaos up there in Jerusalem. All the political things going on there. All the revolts, riots, unrest. God's caring for them. He's taking care of practical issues. It's not just about fulfilling prophecy, though it is that; it's about taking care of these people by caring for them. And this, by the way, in verses 6 to 7 is where the narrative turns quite dear, evoking all those images of gentleness and tenderness we've come to appreciate at the Christmas season as this new mother cares for her child.

Look at verses 6 and 7, "While they were there, the time came for her to give birth." No telling really how long they were there. I mean, if she went early on in the second trimester, through the third trimester, could've been there a month or so. We don't know. But it says, "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." I don't know if you're like me, but I'm thinking, That's it? I want to know more. I mean, tell us all the details. Matthew is equally brief in just mentioning it happened. Let's move on. No trumpets, no parades, no fanfare. Luke didn't even mention the prophetic fulfillment

here. But the time had come. Galatians 4:4 says, "In the fullness of time God sent forth his son." Paul taught the theological significance of Jesus' birth. In fact, he spent a lot of time, in his epistles unpacking theological significances of everything that happened in Jesus' life. But it was Luke who laid down, provided us with the historical foundation, the facts upon which the theology rests. "While they were there, the time came for her to give birth and she gave birth to her first born son."

Just a footnote, the significance of Christianity is that it is not a myth. It's not make-believe. As someone has said, the story doesn't begin, "Once upon a time," but rather, "In those days." Christianity is grounded in real history. It involves real people, real places. It's intertwined with actual times, in fact, verifiable facts. Those who reject Christianity are rejecting reality. They're ignoring real history; they're denying the truth of how things actually happened. Folks, be confident in this story. This is how it happened. Whatever this Book says is how it is. And the one who fears the Lord will live their life according to it.

Now, some look at that final phrase in verse 7 there, "There was no place for them in the inn." They look at that final phrase as evidence of the inhospitable environment there

at Bethlehem. As if this is an indication of the cold indifference of the Jews right here at the beginning toward their Messiah. But that's not quite right. Quite a bit of ink has been spilled on the meaning of that word, inn. It's the Greek word *katalyma*, and it's actually a pretty broad word. It can mean, inn. It can mean, guest room, it can mean, dining room. When Jesus sent his disciples to go and rent the Upper Room, that's the word *katalyma* right there. It could mean, animal stall. I believe the concept of the guest room is probably right, here, not so much an inn, but a guest room. Joseph had relations in Bethlehem and so he arranged something. Good husband providing for his family, he arranges something. The commentator Alfred Plummer suggests that it's possible Joseph had relied upon the hospitality of some friend in Bethlehem, whose guest chamber, however, was already full when he and Mary arrived. It seems reasonable. Joseph and Mary, arriving there, realizing the city has been swollen through the whole registration process going on in the land, they have to make make-shift accommodations. Whoever they arranged with had to help them be accommodated.

It was the second century theologian Justin Martyr who influenced the picture we now have in our minds about the night of the Nativity. According to what he wrote, we've come to see

the nativity scene as happening in kind of a cave, kind of outdoors, right? That's where a lot of those manger scenes are. Here's what he wrote that inspired that in the second century, "But when the child was born in Bethlehem since Joseph could not find a lodging in that village, he took up his quarters in a certain cave near the village. 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." Thanks to Justin, we now have the nativity scenes that put the holy family in a cave surrounded by animals, tended by shepherds and at the same time, visited by wise men. The wise men probably weren't there at that time, but that's another sermon for another time. He just got that detail wrong. So don't look back to the church fathers and say they're impeccable, they're absolutely without error. Nah, every now and again they blow it, just like we do.

But it's probably time to clarify some of these traditions and I think especially to exonerate Bethlehem's reputation as a cold, inhospitable town that would send a pregnant woman out into the cold. Commentator James Edwards, he paints a slightly warmer picture for us of Middle Eastern hospitality. Here's how he described the accommodations that Joseph and Mary would have found. This is what he says, "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, a katalyma, on the other. All three rooms normally had separate entrances and the katalyma was an attached guest room separated from the central room by a solid wall. The stable was separated from the central room by a half wall, thus allowing the family to feed animals without going outdoors. When Joseph and Mary arrived in Bethlehem, the guest rooms in homes were already occupied and hence, the newborn Jesus was swaddled and placed in a manger. The manger was within sight, sound and reach of the central room. Despite improvised arrangements, Middle Eastern hospitality then, as now, would have ensured that Mary, Joseph and Jesus were properly cared for." End quote.

From all I've read, I believe that's a pretty accurate picture, especially so when we consider the character and the kindness of God. The animal stall on the one side separated by a half wall from the central room was even better than the guest room if you think about it. It kept this young couple connected to the heart of that family and cared for in one of her most difficult times in her life, going through childbirth. God provided for the practical needs of Joseph and Mary. There's no need for us to burden them further with our imaginative traditions, okay? Mary gave birth to her firstborn son in a humble, but a relatively comfortable, private accommodation.

That word firstborn there it could be used in a theological sense. Colossians 1:5, 1:18, Psalm 2:7. It could be used in a theological sense to talk about preeminence, *prototokos*. Or it could be talked about in a sense of priority. Even though a younger son is next in the birth order, yet he's given preeminence or prominence, *prototokos* treated like the firstborn over his brothers. Genesis 48:13 to 20 talks about that, Exodus 4:22, Psalm 89, verse 27, it says the same thing about David, firstborn, even though he was the youngest. But here, the term isn't making a theological point. It's not talking just about preeminence. Though those things are true. Here the term is literal. It's referring to Jesus' literal birth order. He was, quite literally, Mary's firstborn son. And as the firstborn, the strong implication of that term is that Jesus had younger siblings. Matthew 1:25 says, "Joseph knew her not until she had given birth to a son." Implication: after the birth of Jesus, after her purification at the temple 40 days later recorded in verse 22 and following there, Joseph and Mary did the natural thing, they came together as husband and wife. They consummated their marriage. That's contrary, is it not, to Roman Catholic teaching? If Luke wanted to indicate that Jesus was the only child of Mary, he had a word for that. It was *monogenes*, only begotten. But he didn't use that word. He used the word first born, *prototokas*. And the Bible tells us plainly that Jesus did

have younger brothers: Matthew 13, Luke 8, John 7. He also had younger sisters: Matthew 13, Mark 6. Jesus, though, was the firstborn.

As soon as Jesus was born, Mary's motherly instincts, hard-wired by God, kicked into gear. God, again, providing for Jesus in very practical ways as Mary does what mothers do. Two simple verbs indicate that in verse 7, "She swaddled her son and she laid him in a manger." She wrapped him tightly and then she put him to bed. First indication of her care for her son. Some commentators have noted the clear parallel that exists there in the structure between Luke 2:7 and then a later passage, Luke 23:53, which links Jesus' birth here to his death. You can turn there, if you like, to see for yourself, but I can just tell you quickly, Luke 2:7 tells us that "Mary wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger." You know what Luke 23:53 says? "Joseph of Arimathea wrapped Jesus' body in a linen cloth and laid it in a tomb." In both cases, Jesus is dependent on the care of others. He can't care for his own body. Someone else is taking care of his body. And once again, here at Jesus' birth is yet another reminder about the nature of his mission on earth. It's foreshadowed. In the first instance, Jesus is laid in a manger, a newborn baby, a tender life, life ahead of him, growth ahead of him. In the second instance, it's only his body,

lifeless and cold. This reminds us Jesus was born to die for our sins. Joel Green points out how later Christian iconography, you know what that is? It's talking about paintings of, you know, Mary and her son and those kinds of things, icons. Later Christian iconography recognized and capitalized on these connections we've just mentioned here, giving the birthplace of Jesus the semblance of a sepulture, a tomb. Even in the tender scene before us, we can never forget the purpose for which God made provision for his son, to purchase the forgiveness of our sins, to grant us eternal life.

But let's not get there yet. Let's enjoy this moment. Because Joseph and Mary here are cozy and comfortable. They're secluded in this stable attached to the home. As brand new parents, they're here rejoicing in this precious life, a truly priceless moment for them. Together they look at Jesus' perfectly formed fingers, play with them, you know, like parents do. Or especially grandparents do. Together they kiss his perfect cheeks; they wonder, like every parent, at a child, who like all children is fearfully and wonderfully made, woven together in all the intricacies of human life in the mother's womb. And before tucking Jesus in for his first outside-the-womb nap, the text tells us that Mary swaddled him. That is to say she bound him tightly in swaddling cloths. It's one of those

details in the Nativity that's become so familiar to us that we tend to pass it by rather quickly without really thinking about it. But we need to ask, why does Luke tell us this? Of all the things he could have said in verse 7, of all the details we want to know as well, this seems a rather mundane and ordinary detail even if it does paint a tender picture for us. Is that all Luke is trying to do, to endear us to this scene?

You mothers know some of this, but I had to look it up. It turns out that swaddling the baby, it's pretty important. First and most basically, swaddling keeps the baby warm for the first few days of its life until its internal thermostat starts to kick in and activate. So, warmth is one reason, keeping all its limbs tucked in. Second, swaddling the baby in the warmth keeps the baby calm transitioning from a closed in, tight, restrictive environment in the womb, to an open expansive world outside the womb. That's pretty traumatic, pretty unsettling. So swaddling helps with that transition, keeping the baby calm. Not only that, but swaddling the baby by keeping the baby calm, it protects him from his own startle reflex. Have you seen that when babies jump, they're startled? The baby hasn't learned to control his muscular impulses yet, so his movements are involuntary, unintentional, random. His flailing arms, as you may have seen, can extend his sharp fingernails and cut his soft

skin. Swaddling prevents that. In fact, some sources say swaddling alone can result in a 28% reduction in crying. I'm all for swaddling. Non-crying babies sleep better. That's a third thing, keeping the baby calm helps ensure the baby sleeps better and longer. So when baby sleeps, mom sleeps. When mom sleeps, mom is happy, everybody is happy. You know how that works. It's an arithmetic we can all understand. Not only that, but some say that immobilizing those arms and legs at that early age, it helps the baby eventually develop better motor skill organization just as the brain is working through all those issues.

So all of that, warmth, calm, protection, rest, growth and development, that's what Luke wants us to meditate on and think about as we see Jesus' first hour on the earth. He wants us to see this that Mary has swaddled her baby Jesus. This baby, who is the great Son of the Most High God. This baby, conceived under the shadow of the power of the Most High. This baby, conceived by the miraculous action of the Holy Spirit himself. This baby is a baby. He's human in every way. He's dependent on his mother. He's in need of protection and care and comfort like every other human baby. So, this is a clear and tender evidence that Luke is providing for us of the full humanity of Jesus Christ along with all its inherent weaknesses, all its inherent

needs, all its dependency, its vulnerabilities. Jesus, like us, required the tender care of a mother, the provision and protection of his father, loving parents. Like us, Jesus is fully human, which is what God required to make him the sin-bearer, the one who would save us from our sins. You see how God's provision strategically and practically provided for Jesus Christ all through the normal stuff of life? All through our normal decisions God does what God does. Let's pray before him.

Heavenly Father, thank you that you are God. You do whatever you will to do. You are our God and our Savior, you're eternal and sovereign, and we rejoice in who you are. We rejoice in this precious story in Scripture about the birth of our Lord and Savior. We're so grateful for him. And we rejoice to come before you and give thanks, to worship, to meditate, really to give our lives for him in the worship of him and the honor and glory of him. We ask that you help us to do that, to give him honor and glory. Here in this Christmas season as we interact with people, let it not be about Christmas traditions and baking and decorations and Christmas trees and gifts and all the things that really are a nice time of the season for us as we enjoy family together, but let this be about the Gospel for us. Who is going to tell them if not us? Who's going to set the record straight if not us? Please use us, Father, to tell the story of

the Gospel, to teach people the truth about salvation from sins that people might know and might be saved. We thank you that you've saved us, forgiving all of our sin and covering us in spotless righteousness of this beautiful child. It's in his name that we pray, Amen.