

Luke 2 ¹ And it came to pass in those days *that* a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. ² This census first took place while Quirinius was governing Syria. ³ So all went to be registered, everyone to his own city. ⁴ Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, ⁵ to be registered with Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with child. ⁶ So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered. ⁷ And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

⁸ Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid. ¹⁰ Then the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. ¹¹ For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹² And this *will be* the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger.” ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: ¹⁴“Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!”

¹⁵ So it was, when the angels had gone away from them into heaven, that the shepherds said to one another, “Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us.” ¹⁶ And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger. ¹⁷ Now when they had seen *Him*, they made widely known the saying which was told them concerning this Child. ¹⁸ And all those who heard *it* marveled at those things which were told them by the shepherds. ¹⁹ But Mary kept all these things and pondered *them* in her heart. ²⁰ Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told them.

Today is the day people have chosen to celebrate the birth of Jesus. But what is it all about? Why do it? I suppose we could come up with all sorts of negative things to say about this holiday, but that certainly will not help anyone get closer to God. What is this day all about? Of course, the Christmas story has about a year of setting the stage before the actual birth of Jesus: the announcement of the birth of John the Baptist, angels talking, separately, to both Mary and Joseph, the birth of John. But this day is about the birth of Jesus. And, God left for us about another several years of bits and pieces of history that follow this day: about when Jesus was brought to the Temple to be registered and two prophets stopped the young parents and gave them special messages from God, about the wise men, about King Herod sending soldiers to kill all the children under the age of two in Bethlehem, about Joseph and Mary, with Jesus of course, fleeing to Egypt in the nick of time, about the family returning after the king died. But today is about one day: the birth of Jesus. What does God have to teach us through this one event? How is this event supposed to build our faith?

1. God makes pointed promises.

God had this event planned before He created the universe. 1 Peter 1:20 “He [Jesus] was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you.” Jesus was not an afterthought; He was not a response to the poor choices that people make. Rather, the life of Jesus on earth was the key point in making sure everyone understood the purpose of this universe in which we live. God said from the beginning, “You have two options.

You can captain your own ship and do your best to bring it into port without even one navigation error. Or, you can give up control of your own life and trust me to make you a success by methods you can't do and probably wouldn't understand. And, by the way, the first choice doesn't work; the second one does."

But what happens as soon as God makes a promise? Then God needed to work out the details. And every time God settled on a detail, He fenced Himself in. Think about the sequence of promises that resulted in God promising that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. First God promised Abraham, one out of millions on earth at the time. The potential for where the Messiah would come became limited to a small fraction of humanity. The odds narrowed with each generation when God picked Isaac instead of Ishmael or one of the sons of Abraham with Keturah. God narrowed the field by a factor of two by picking Jacob. Picking Judah cut the target population by another factor of 12. Identifying the house of David cut the field by another one in a million. Then, seven hundred years before the fact, God specified Bethlehem, which was no thriving metropolis, but a little farm town. As a comparison, in the poorest countries of the world, the birth rates are highest, in the range of 25 to 35 births per 1000 population, as compared to 14 in the US. Bethlehem was a village with far less than 1000 population, so there would be, on average, less than 25 births per year. That's what God's promises had narrowed it down to: a pool of 25 potential pairs of parents out of perhaps 100 million on the earth. I wonder if God had to engineer that tax thing in order to get the right people to the right place at the right time.

Christmas is a time to remember the impossible nature of the promises of God. All of God's promises are made against a backdrop of real people who make real choices. And, if you have ever really considered the choices people make, you know that the reasoning behind them often makes no sense at all. Imagine trying to set up a series of events in the middle of billions of unpredictable choices by mostly non-thinking people. Some try to explain that away by claiming that God knows what choices people will make. But that makes our choices an illusion and God nothing more than a great deceiver, because God asks us to choose and we sincerely believe that we choose. Sixteen times in the Bible God is said to change His mind. If God knows the future, He cannot be said to change His mind. No, God has to work in the middle of the chaos of human choices and make His promises come out. That is talent. Just getting Jesus born at the right time in the right place to the right parents was a colossal project which gives us immense confidence that He can handle the relatively minor disasters of my life.

Just as importantly, many of the details of Jesus' birth were not promised. They just happened that way as the result of the accumulated choices of billions of people. God didn't promise anything about a stable or a manger or the presence of livestock. "No Vacancy" at the inn was just the way it worked out. God did not promise nice weather or clear skies, although He may have manipulated that in order to make the angel thing work out better. He just didn't promise it in advance.

Why is that important? Among those who care anything about God, a terrible number of them trust that God will work out things He never promised to work out. Some years ago, I was studying the Bible with a young lady, and, out of the blue, her brother approached me about being baptized. Being naturally skeptical, I figured there was more to this story. It turned out that he had just been arrested for Driving Under the Influence, and thought that being baptized would make that go away.

Many people have turned away from Christianity because bad things happened in their lives: the death of a child or other loved one, debilitating disease, financial collapse. They

assume that God promised that such things would not happen to them if they did the church thing. God never made any such promises, which is easy enough to see by reading the histories of the really faithful people in the Bible. Jesus, the apostles, Old Testament prophets, early Christians all had uncomfortable lives and horrible things happen to them. God did not promise us immunity from the fallout from the billions of bad choices people make around us, let alone our own. Instead, God promised that faithful people would be given (not “would develop” or “would learn to” – but “would be given”) the ability to overcome the results of living in a broken world with messy people, and, better yet, the ability to overcome ourselves and live a joyous, hope-filled life on this earth, with even better things to come in the next.

Christmas reminds us that God makes good on His promises, so it becomes really important to know what He promised.

2. God gives us illustrations so we can understand His really important points.

Think about the situation in Israel for Mary and Joseph. Obviously, they were poor people and had no say in how government played out. They could not vote. They had no judicial system to correct social injustice. They were pretty much helpless in a messed up country. Mary and Joseph do not appear to be political activists. But, as faithful Jewish people, they would be understandably concerned about the state of Israel. The king wasn't even an Israelite. The High Priesthood had become a political football. No prophets had been seen in nearly 400 years. Had God given up on Israel?

In three places in the two descriptions of the Christmas story, Matthew and Luke cite historical references from the Old Testament to show that hope was legitimate. These were not promises, but illustrations. God manufactured these situations many centuries before Jesus so that He would have a way to draw a picture for people so that they could understand that, despite all appearances, God really had a handle on the situation.

Matthew used an illustration from the time of King Ahaz, about eight centuries before Jesus, recorded in Isaiah 7. Things looked bad for Ahaz. A conspiracy was afoot to replace him with a foreign king, putting an end to the line of David. The country was pretty much helpless against its enemies. Isaiah comforted Ahaz with a promise that the situation would be resolved within 65 years. That may not seem to be much comfort to Ahaz. But for someone who was concerned about the future of Israel and the throne of David and the eternal kingdom, it was a promise that, despite what appeared to be political inevitability and certain defeat, God could handle it. Matthew used it to illustrate that the fortunes of Israel at the time of the birth of Jesus were just as bad, but that there was a legitimate hope. God had done it before.

Years later, Isaiah (in Isaiah 60) also predicted that the nation would be totally devastated and would go into captivity in Babylon, but that God would replant them and this replanted kingdom would be the beginnings of great things. That promise came true about five centuries before Jesus. But Luke used it as an illustration of how God could take a hijacked kingdom and replant it, resulting in an eternal kingdom.

Jeremiah, in Jeremiah 31, described the incredible devastation of the destruction of Jerusalem and the rest of Israel by the Babylonians, but gave hope that, despite the terrible calamity, God could make it all come out. Jeremiah's prophecies were satisfied centuries before Jesus, but Matthew used them as an illustration that God's promises are not sidetracked by war, wickedness, or whatever people can devise. When things look most impossible, God makes it work.

Christmas reminds us that the eternal kingdom is a sure thing. Mary and Joseph had no appreciable net worth or political capital. They were just two poor people in a ridiculous country that was headed in the completely wrong direction. God heaped up example after example, historical illustrations one upon another, to make sure we understand that no amount of bad choices can foil the promises of God.

We complain that our government gives preference to those who clearly live contrary to God's wishes. It's not going to affect the Kingdom. We look at China, where a new wave of official atheism is about to start, and think that evangelism may be hindered. It's not going to affect the kingdom. Being a Christian, let alone spreading the gospel, is dangerous if not illegal in most Middle Eastern countries. It's not going to affect the kingdom. In India, initiating a conversation about the gospel with a Hindu is illegal. It's not going to affect the kingdom.

If God could get from Moses to Jesus, spanning 1500 years of stubborn people, outright rebellion, and unbelievably bad choices, despite the overwhelming displays of power from God, making the church work should be a minor inconvenience. The Israelites saw the Red Sea part, walked between the walls of water, and watched the whole thing collapse onto the pursuing Egyptian army. Within a month they were complaining about the food. God gave them free bread, free meat, and clothes and shoes that didn't wear out. Within a month they were complaining about the water. After numerous wars in which they did not need to raise a sword, but rather watched the enemy literally turn on itself in total confusion, they were including pagan idols in the Temple of God. If God could take that and still bring the Messiah on schedule, getting the church to Judgment Day should be a Sabbath Rest.

Christmas reminds us that God can make His promises happen no matter what bad choices people make.

3. Disadvantaged circumstances leave room for God.

Joseph and Mary had a rough start to their marriage. The Bible clearly says that these were two people of whom God approved. God genuinely liked them. Two faithful people actually were getting ready to marry each other. The whole miraculous conception thing – that hardly seems like a benefit for being on God's good side. If that is how God treats His friends, I'm pretty sure I don't want to be His enemy. But a difficult start gives God room to operate. It's like God intentionally gives the world a three-step head start just to be fair, so that there is no mistaking who made it work. Christmas reminds us that starting out disadvantaged makes you better able to demonstrate the power of God.

Then, on top of that, the government was totally insensitive. They want their tax money, so everyone had to go to his ancestral town to register. They were not signing up for Food Stamps. They travelled the length of the country when Mary was nine-months pregnant in order to pay taxes. Joseph and Mary had no advantage. In fact, being poor, they were truly disadvantaged. If they had had a few dollars, they could have bribed an official, or sent a servant to pay the tax for them. Christmas reminds us that, when the government is at its worst, God is at His best.

Joseph and Mary are relaxing by the livestock after a pleasant evening of labor, delivery, cutting the cord, and cleaning up. The obstetrician, anesthesiologist, labor and delivery nurses, and staff had finally left them to be alone with their new son. And visitor's showed up – after visiting hours – in the middle of the night. And the visitors were neither mother nor mother-in-law. They were neither school friends nor business associates. They were complete strangers, less than sterile, low on the social scale with the shortcomings in etiquette that implies, and all

men. Christmas reminds us that, even in the most difficult of times, if you have a sense of humor, God can make things work.

So, Joseph and Mary went to the town of his ancestors, Bethlehem, the city of David. And they didn't stay with relatives, which certainly would have been better than where they spent the night. This taxation thing was not a surprise. The government made known their new taxing method, but it took people some time to get the details in order. That's how it was in those days. Surely Joseph had had time to contact an uncle or a third cousin in the area. But no, Joseph had to try to find lodging in an inn. Joseph and Mary were on their own, no family to help them, with a really important cargo. Christmas reminds us that, when we feel most alone, God has it handled.

The shepherds brought a strange story about seeing a bunch of angels. Of course, Joseph and Mary had had their own times with angels about nine months previously, and the information from the shepherds was not new to the parents. But to have strangers show up in the middle of the night – low class, excited strangers – has got to be disconcerting. And then the shepherds started telling everyone they met about what they had seen. Surely, over at least the next few days or weeks, both Mary and Joseph felt a little uncomfortable walking to market because of all the people who would stare or whisper or point. Christmas reminds us that doing the impossible makes you a social misfit.

3. The advantage goes to the disadvantaged.

If a wealthy or powerful person accomplishes a great thing, we do not think it unusual. They have resources. When humble people get it done, people notice.

Focusing on the power of God at Christmas is not the point. Lowliness is the point. As Paul put it in 2 Corinthians 4:7, “We have this treasure in earthen vessels that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of ourselves.” Jesus was born in humble circumstances with no advantages. Ordinary people were attracted to Him as an adult because He was one of them. He did not gain a large hearing because He was a slick orator. Rather, He was thought-provoking and straightforward. Certainly, many people had trouble getting some of His points, but not because the points were complex, but because the good news was an unexpected answer to an age-old question: “How do I handle life?”

Christmas reminds us that God cares for humble people, humble in attitude and humble of resources. What God wants out of us is trust. The Bible calls it faith – trust that God can handle my life a whole lot better than I can. It's not a partnership, it's voluntary slavery. This trust is what re-connects our eternal parts with God. But how much trust is required?

First, our trust must be an informed trust. God accepts trust in what He promised, not in what we make up that we think we want.

Second, God expects a quality of faith like Abraham had (Romans 4:12 - 16). Many people have tortured the context of that “faith as a mustard seed” line (Matthew 17:20) to tell people that very tiny faith is acceptable. That's wrong. Jesus used that line to tell His disciples that they had no faith, not acceptable faith. God's plan is to transform those who trust Him (2 Corinthians 3:18, Romans 8:29) into those who have the faith of Jesus (Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, James, and Revelation). Clearly, this is impossible. Therefore, it qualifies as a promise from God.

Third, our trust must be characterized by God's descriptions of faith, not my descriptions of faith. All of God's characteristics are symbolized in baptism. But, just like the Old Testament

rituals, it's not the ritual that pleases God, but the heart that prompted the ritual and makes that trust acceptable.

- 1 Corinthians 6:11, Ephesians 5:26 I am reserved for godly purposes (sanctified)
- Romans 6:3-4, 12:1. I become a sacrifice like Jesus.
- Romans 6:4, Titus 3:5; Colossians 2:12 I walk in newness of life. My spirit is resurrected: reconnected.
- 1 Corinthians 12:13 I will achieve miraculous unity with other faithful people.
- 1 Peter 3:21 The water rescued Noah from an evil world as baptism rescues me.
- Romans 6:6 I am freed from slavery to sin.
- Acts 22:16, Hebrews 10:22 My sins are washed away.
- Acts 2:38 I receive the Holy Spirit
- Galatians 3:27 I am being transformed (2 Corinthians 3:18) into the image of Jesus.
- Romans 6:5 I will be raised on Judgment Day.