

Texts

Luke 2:1-7

¹In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration when^[a] Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³And all went to be registered, each to his own town. ⁴And 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, ⁵to be registered with Mary, his betrothed,^[b] who was with child. ⁶And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. ⁷And 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.^[c]

Philippians 2: 6-11

⁶who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped,^[b] ⁷but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant,^[c] being born in the likeness of men. ⁸And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. ⁹Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰so that at the name of Jesus every

knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Main Point

Introduction - 200

Hook/Welcome

This morning,

Today we are going to look at the Christmas story through two different lenses. The first will be though physical lenses if you like. We are going to think about the gruelling path Mary and Joseph had to travel leading up and during the birth of Christ.

But then we will look at the Christmas story though a spiritual sense. We will think about the glorious plan that was being put into motion through this difficult and painful experience for Josep and Mary.

And I think it is important to think of both. God is at work in this world and he uses the physical things to bring about his spiritual purposes. To discard either is to deny God work.

And in the physical things often are painful, confusing, and discouraging. But as we see in

the story of the birth of Christ, and also in the death of Christ, we find that God uses these things for his glory and for our good.

Part 1 – The Gruelling Path (600)

Exposition

Under Roman Rule

So let's begin by thinking about the gruelling path that Josep and Mary had to follow leading up to the birth of our Lord Jesus.

Look at verse 1, 2 and 3 of Luke 2 again. Luke is very matter of fact, in the classic style of a historian but it is full of loaded implications.

¹In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration when^[a] Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³And all went to be registered, each to his own town.

Even just the historical setting reminds us of the roman occupation and oppression.

The people of Israel, Joseph and Mary included, were a conquered people under the rule and reign of the romans. There was no real freedom for them. They had to obey the roman law and the will of the roman emperor to keep their lives. They hated this. It was a constant humiliation for these gentile pagans to have rule over them.

And out of nowhere, as far as Joseh and Mary would have been concerned, the emperor, all the way in Rome, decides to take a census. By the whim of this man, they are forced to put their life on hold and go on this dangerous journey. This is not a pious pilgrimage planned in advance, or a joyful time to visit family, this is a forced displacement.

Plans and responsibilities have to be put on hold, and you can imagine the financial strain. What little saving they had would need to be spent on this long and dangerous, and as far as they were concerned pointless trip.

Long Road

But they have little choice and they set off on this long journey.

Look at verses 4 and 5.

⁴ 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, ⁵ to be registered with Mary, his betrothed,^[b] who was with child.

It is possible that Joseph had or borrowed a donkey to help with transport, but that is never stated in the Bible. But donkey or no donkey, this trip would have been horrible!

The distance from Nazareth to Bethlehem is about 150 km in mountainous terrain. Up and down, up and down. I don't know if anybody here has walked 150 km before, but that is a long way to walk.

We are talking 6 to 7 hours of walking in a day for up to 6 days. Sleeping it rough, eating little food, hoping to find water, and in constant danger of unsavoury characters and wild animals.

In anyone's book that would be serious feat, but add to that Mary has reached full term of her pregnancy.

Think of all the normal difficulties of a long hike: Muscles aching, sore feet, blisters, sore back, fatigue; and then compound it with the normal difficulties of the last pregnancy: Sore back, sore joints, swollen feet, extra weight and generally tired. And you get a glimpse of what they had to endure.

So in the worst possible time they are forced to take this gruelling journey, spend all their savings and endure hardship, all at the whim of a pagan emperor. And when they arrive, instead of a warm welcome and hot bath and a hearty meal, things get even worse because the baby is coming.

Worst Birthing plan ever

Look at verse 6 and 7.

⁶ And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. ⁷ And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.^[c]

All the series of event have led to the worst birthing plan ever.

You feel for Joseph, who like all fathers to be, would have feel helpless to help Mary in the best of times. But here Joseph cannot even have a warm comfortable place for Mary.

There is no support from family, there is no elderly lady to help, encourage and reassure the young couple. They are in a strange place where nothing familiar. They are strangers in a strange town.

The reference to the manger, or feeding trough, implies the only room they found to rest was in a stable or in a cave where animals were brought for shelter.

They would both still have been exhausted from their 150 km hike, only to face the marathon of labour and birth.

This was the worst birthing plan ever, and it would have seemed that everything was going wrong.

Part 2 – The Great Plan – 1100

Link

Yet in the midst of the roman rule, the long road, and the terrible birth plan, God had them exactly where he wanted them, and they were part of something monumental.

If we only look at this story through physical lenses, we would only see a gruelling path that a young couple were forced to take. But with spiritual lenses we get a feel for the magnitude of what is happening.

This is part of a master plan at work. In fact, this Gruelling Path is a critical move, a strategic move in a plan that spanned 4000 years before and would continue to operate 2000 years later.

Like a chess player who has put his pieces in place ready for the last few moves before check mate, God has been preparing the world for His Check Mate. But this chess game started 4000 years ago and involved millions of pieces, and the earth is the playing field.

The Gruelling Path Joseph and Mary had to endure is the first move which begins to reveal the master plan. Like when the first allied boats appearing on the coasts of Normandy, revealing to the Nazis that the beaches of Normandy would be where the invasion would take place.

All the pieces are set, and the move is made.

The gruelling, difficult and painful road is the move that begins to show The Greatest Plan in the history of the world, God's plan for the salvation of mankind.

Prophecy about him being born in Bethlehem

Even in the passage from Luke there are hints of this Great plan which are being put into motion.

For example, it had long been prophesied that Bethlehem would be the place of birth of the messiah.

In Mica 5:2 we read:

*But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah,
who are 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.*

The promised ruler of Israel was to come from Bethlehem.

Prophecy about virgin

And also, Luke highlights the fact that Joseph and Mary were betrothed. There had been a formal commitment, but they had not consummated their marriage. Mary was still a virgin.

And this too was prophesied in times past. That a virgin would conceive and that child would be called Immanuel. That that child would be God among men

We read this prophecy in Isaiah 7:14:

Therefore, the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.^[h]

Turn to Philippians

This great plan of salvation is the theme of the entire Bible, but the magnitude of this specific move is summarized in Philippians 2:6-7.

Please turn there with me.

[Jesus] ⁶*who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped,*^[b] ⁷*but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant,*^[c] *being born in the likeness of men.*

There is so much in this verse, but let us pull out a few things which show us the spiritual magnitude of what was happening during Joseph and Mary's gruelling journey.

Jesus was God

First off notice in the start of verse 6. Jesus was God. The child Mary was carrying was the second person of the Trinity. He was in existence before the beginning of time and was active in

the creation of the world. He was very God of very God.

In John 1:1-3 we read

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made.

And in Hebrews 1: 2-3 we read

but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. ³ He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power.

Did not Grasp equality with God

Jesus is God and yet he does not Grasp equality with God.

[Our Lord] *did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped* as we read in the second part of verse 6

That is, he chose to not used for his equality with God for his own advantage. He chose to let go of that position and not cling to it selfishly.

Taking the form of a servant

So He forsook His right as Lord. He forsook his due position as king and took the form of a

servant. Like the CEO becoming the errand boy, or the captain of the ship becoming the toilet cleaner.

Notice the start of verse 7: *but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant.*

A Servant owns nothing, not even the clothes on his back, not even his own time or his own life.

Jesus was not just a man among men, but he was a servant of servants.

He was born in the likeness of men

And further, he was *born in the likeness of men.* as the end of verse 7 tells us.

The creator of the universe, the king of kings and lord of lords put himself in a position where he needed to be cared for and nurtured for by His creatures. He needed to be fed, changed and clothed by his parents. He was vulnerable to the elements and needed normal human care by his parents.

He would know the pains of growth and developed like other children He would feel hungry, thirsty, and tired. He would suffer pain, become tired and know the pangs of sorrow.

The second person of the Trinity was *born in the likeness of men.*

Ant illustration

That is the monumental event that is taking place in the gruelling journey of Josepha and Mary.

God is humbling himself, condescending himself, taking the form of a man, to put in motion his great plan of salvation.

And I mentioned before that this is like the CEO becoming the errand boy, but the magnitude of the change is much more. It is more like if a human became an ant because of his love for the colony. To dwell among the ant colony as the lowest of ant workers. But even with that picture, we don't grasp the fact that He made us and then chose to live as one of his creations.

Link

With physical lenses the story of Christmas is the story of a couple on a Gruelling path but with spiritual lenses the events remembered at Christmas is a monumental move in God's great plan for salvation.

Before we bring our time together to a close, I want us to remember that this is not the last time that a gruelling path would be part of the Great plan.

Part 3 – The Glorious Promise - 400

The glorious plan happening in gruelling path

The second person of the trinity took the form of a servant, but he went further than that.

He humbled himself to the point of death, and the worst kind of death, death on the cross.

If you still have your bibles open in Philippians 2, look at verse 8.

⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

About 33 years later Jesus would take another gruelling path. He would be falsely accused, imprisoned, condemned to death, insulted, humiliated, beaten and crucified. He would suffer beyond what we could imagine. From a physical perspective he would be the victim of human cruelty and a wasted life.

But with spiritual lenses, we see that God was redeeming his people to himself through the work of Jesus on the Cross. On the cross, Jesus was paying the penalty for the sins of sinners so that they could be saved.

Jesus' final gruelling path would purchase the salvation of any who believe in his name. Anyone who places their faith in the work of Jesus on the cross will be saved from Hell.

Once again, what seems like pointless suffering is in fact Part of God's great plan to save sinners like you and like me.

Conclusion 200

As we bring our time together to a close, let us remember the physical and spiritual realities at work at the birth of Christ. Let us remember the glorious which was happening among the mundane.

The experience of Joseph and Mary was though. They felt the bitterness and humiliation of being under the roman rule. They felt the long road between Nazareth and Bethlehem, and they felt the difficulties of giving birth in terrible circumstances. They travelled a gruelling path.

But there was more than met the eye. They were key players in God's great plan of salvation. They were part of a monumental time in history where the God of the universe came to dwell among his creation. With spiritual lenses on we see that this gruelling path was in fact a critical part of his Great Plan to save sinners.

And one day, Jesus would taken another gruelling path. He would suffer and die. And through that He would save sinners like you and like me.

So as we remember the birth of Jesus, and the events which led to it, we remember the Gruelling Path to Glory.

Let us pray.