

## THE PERPLEXITIES OF CHRISTMAS PAST—AND PARALLELS WITH CHRISTMAS PRESENT

Here we are—Christmas Eve Day, 2023! Some families do most of their Christmas celebrations on Christmas Eve; others wait until Christmas Day! Regardless of **when** we celebrate, one thing is fairly common in most families—it is a **busy** time of the year!

Here is a small “sample” of what makes **some of us** busy this time of year: baking cookies... buying gifts...cooking special meals...decorating houses, trees, and yards...sending out Christmas cards...family get-togethers...church parades and programs...school programs...work parties...the list goes on and on, doesn’t it?

When our kids were young—Abbey was 6—they were in a Christmas play and sang a song entitled “Busy, Busy Christmas!” I’ve given you the words on the back of the song that Brenda sang. I’m not going to read you the whole thing, but notice the chorus—which was sung in the form of a chant:

*“Busy, busy, busy, busy; Oh my spinning head is dizzy!  
And my mind is in a tizzy! Busy, busy, busy, busy.”*

We can feel like that sometimes, can’t we? Maybe you’re feeling like that **right now!** Hopefully you can slow down your **mind**—and heart-rate—and allow yourself to focus on how the Bible describes **the first** Christmas.

Please take your Bible and turn to Luke 2. As I looked back over previous Christmas messages, I was a little surprised to realize that I had never preached on Luke 2:1-7—until today! Please follow along as I read vs 1-7.

While reading over and studying this passage, one thing that struck me was **how much** Luke writes about **why** Mary and Joseph were in Bethlehem—compared to **how little** he wrote about the **actual birth**. Verses 1-5 are about **why** they were there; vs 6 refers to her **being due** while they were there, but only vs 7 refers to **Jesus’ birth**. Notice again the simplicity of what Luke—whom Paul referred to as the “beloved physician” in Col 4:14—wrote in vs 7 “And she brought forth her firstborn son...” Maybe Luke was a baby doctor and that’s why he wrote so “matter of fact” about the birth!

Because “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable,” there is obviously some significance as to **why** Luke spends so much time giving the details regarding **how and why** Mary and Joseph were in Bethlehem when Jesus was born. We spent our Bible Study hour this morning digging into that; here is a quick review of what we looked at to lay the background.

### **1. The prophecy of Christ’s birth**

Notice **Micah 5:2** “But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of **Judah**, yet **out of thee shall He come forth** unto me that is to be **ruler in Israel**; whose goings forth have been from **of old, from everlasting.**”

--Why am I calling this a **prophecy** and not a **prediction**? Because **God doesn’t predict** that things might happen—He **proclaims certain things will happen!**

--What is this proclamation about? That Jesus would be born in Bethlehem—the Bethlehem in Judah.

--How do we know that is **not a reference** to King David? Because David lived and reigned 300 years before this!

--How do we know this **is a reference to Jesus**? Because it can **only be said of Jesus** that He was **from everlasting. Only God** is from everlasting; God is the only One who **always has been!**

Next let’s consider... **2. The problems regarding the prophecy**

There were two problems—two obstacles—regarding Jesus being born in Bethlehem.

A. Did Mary and Joseph know where Jesus would be born?

How can **we know** what Mary and Joseph knew? We can’t—unless the Bible says it!

And it doesn't say for sure whether or not Mary and Joseph knew Micah 5:2. I tend to think they **did not know** for several reasons. Here are two:

1) Micah 5:2 is the **only verse** in the OT that refers to **where** Christ would be born. It is **highly unlikely** that these two young teens personally possessed **any** of the OT, so it is very possible **that they didn't know this verse**, even though it was an important one. After all, there's a lot of verses **we don't know**—and we have the whole Bible!

2) Last week we noted that Mary—in spite of her youth—was a woman of faith and humility. If **they knew** where Jesus was to be born, it seems they would have gone to Bethlehem on their own **way before her due date** to ensure Jesus was born there!

Problem #1? Mary and Joseph probably did not know Jesus had to be born in Bethlehem!

B. Mary and Joseph were in Nazareth—roughly 85 miles away!

So even though Mary and Joseph may **not have known** Jesus would be born in Bethlehem, **God certainly knew**—and He needed to **get them to Bethlehem** before Mary delivered the baby!

But Mary was nearing her due date, and the 85 or so miles—mostly uphill—would take 5 to 6 days according to some commentators. And if **they didn't know** they had to go there, how was God going **to get them** there? The answer is found in the details Luke provides in verses 1-5.

And it is in those details that we see... **3. The providence of God in fulfilling prophecy**

What do I mean by the **providence** of God? It is **God's hand** in the lives of men—and in circumstances—that God orchestrates to **bring about His will**. It is God's direction of history—which is **"His story!"** And—as mentioned earlier—since God had Luke write down for us **how it was** that Mary and Joseph ended up in Bethlehem, He wants us to know about it and think about it. So here's the background that I shared during our Bible study hour this morning:

--The Jews were under Roman rule—and **hated it!** They hated even more **paying taxes** to the Roman government! And the decree made by Caesar Augustus was a census of the entire Roman empire for the purpose of **collecting taxes!**

--When the Roman government conducted a census of the people under their rule, they did not make them return to their homeland. They **could register** in the city in which they lived. **The Jewish custom**, however, was to return to their homeland—even though not required by Rome.

--Rome—where this decree was made—was **2000 plus miles** away. It took time for the census to be completed and historians believe that the Jews "took their sweet old time" in getting it done. In fact, MacArthur suggests based on his study that the census was not carried out in Palestine until **two to four years after** the decree was announced! He goes on to say that Augustus **must have imposed** a strict deadline—and **that is what led** Mary and Joseph to go to Bethlehem and be there when she delivered the baby Jesus!

To recap, God uses an unsaved, self-serving and self-worshipping ruler to issue a decree to carry out a census that is ignored for 2-4 years. He then sets a deadline—which just "happens" to occur at the time of Jesus birth. And Mary and Joseph—being Jewish—follow the **Jewish** custom of returning to their place of ancestry **instead of staying put** in Nazareth. **Luke 2:6** "And so it was, that, **while they were there**, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered." That, my friends, is the providence of God!

Let's consider next... **4. The perplexity surrounding Christ's birth**

In spite of **the certainty** that Christ was born **in Bethlehem**, there are still a lot of things that we **cannot be certain of**. For example:

--How **long were** Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem before Mary gave birth to Jesus? We don't know! Pretty safe to say it was **not the night they arrived** in Bethlehem, though! Why do I say that? Notice again vs 6. This verse certainly seems to paint a different picture than Mary and Joseph arriving in town, knocking on the door of the inn, being told there was no room, then going out to the barn and delivering the baby Jesus!

Other questions that arise from this passage:

--Was Jesus born in a barn, a cave, or out in the open? The cave idea—though we maybe never heard of it—dates back to the year 140 A.D. Tradition has it that Christ was born in a cave in the side of a hill.

Here's another: **What was the inn** that had no vacancy—and why was a manger present? And **where were all their relatives?** Mary and Joseph were both of the lineage of David. Why didn't any of their relatives take them into their homes? We can't tackle all these questions, but I do want to look at two.

#### A. The nature of the inn

The **English** word "inn" occurs only two times in the NT—both by Luke.

--One is here in vs 7; the other is in the **parable of the Good Samaritan**. Most of us are familiar with that parable. Notice **Lk 10:34-35** "And went to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine, and set him on his own beast, and brought him to an **inn**, and took care of him. And on the morrow when he departed, he took out two pence, and gave them to the host, and said unto him, Take care of him; and whatsoever thou spendest more, when I come again, I will repay thee."

--It's pretty obvious from these two verses in Luke 10, that the "inn"—in this parable—is a place where you "pay to stay," like our current-day hotel or motel.

--What about the "inn" in vs 7—the one with the supposed "no vacancy" sign? Luke uses a **different Greek word** than in Luke 10—which means he is referring to a **different kind** of place than a hotel/motel.

--The Greek word that **inn** comes from in Luke 2:7 is "kata-loomah" which literally means "loosening down." Vine's Expository Dictionary of NT Words defines it as "a place where travelers and their beasts untied their packages, girdles, and sandals." It is translated "inn" here, but "guest chamber" in Mk 14:14 and Lk 22:11. Think of it like a "back in the day" **wayside rest area** where you could "pull in" with your animals.

--MacArthur suggests that these shelters had **two levels** with the top part being **like a loft** in a barn. **People** would stay in the loft; **their animals** would be below them on the ground level so they couldn't wander off—or be stolen!

--But...Bethlehem was **full of people** for the census, and the upper part of the shelters—the "inn"—was full. And so it is quite likely that Mary and Joseph were on the **ground floor** where the animals were—and why Luke writes that she "laid Jesus in a manger"—a feeding trough—after giving birth and swaddling Him!

Another perplexity surrounding Christ's birth is this: B. The absence of sympathy

I think you'd agree that the description I just gave you about the "inn" is such that the inn keeper is not the heartless villain that we often picture him to be!

--But what **about others?** What about **their relatives** that lived in town? **Where was their hospitality?**

--And what about those that were **in the same shelter?** Surely there had to be **one family—one couple**—that would give up their "guest chamber" for this young woman who was about to give birth!

--But there wasn't, was there? But **why? Why** was there no room for Jesus **then?** I believe it was for **some of the same reasons** that there is no room for Jesus **now**.

We'll talk about some of those reasons in a minute, but I want us to first really **try to imagine ourselves in the scene** that is before us.

**Joseph** had been told by an angel that Mary's pregnancy is a miracle from God and that she would bring forth a son that he was to call Jesus: "for He shall save His people from their sins" (Mt 1:21).

**Mary was told**—by the same angel—that Jesus would be the **Son of the Highest**...and would be given the **throne of David**...and would have a kingdom that would never end...& that He would be called the Son of God!

Now imagine that **you are** Joseph. You're in Bethlehem...the place is full...and your espoused wife is **due to give birth any day now** to the long-awaited Messiah. Do you think Joseph **kept all of this to himself** when he was looking for a place for them to stay?

Please know that **this is not in the Bible**, but I can't help but think that Joseph was **running around** like **a crazy man**, telling anyone and everyone that Mary was about to give **birth to Emmanuel**—God with us!

Imagine Joseph going from person-to-person and saying, ‘**You’ve got to believe me!** We **both** had a visit from an angel with a message from God—that Mary is going to give birth to the Messiah! We **know it’s true** because when Mary went to visit her cousin Elisabeth, Elisabeth **confirmed** what the angel had said! You’ve got to believe me—and help us!’

But no one did, it seems, so now a **dejected Joseph** returns to Mary and says, ‘No room! No one believes me! We’ll have to make do with this little spot that we have.’

With that scene in mind, let’s consider...

### **5. The parallel between no-room for Jesus then—and no-room for Jesus now**

What are some reasons that those nearby were unwilling to give up their place and “switch spots” with Mary and Joseph?

#### A. They didn’t want to give up their comfort

Picture yourself in the loft—and that you’ve been there for a few days. You’re all settled in...the kids have their spots and are happy—and you slept good the night before! Would you **give up your comfort** and go down to where the animals are eating...and drinking...and **getting rid of** what they eat and drink! **Probably not!**

Isn’t that a reason why people don’t make room in their lives for **Jesus now**? ‘I’ll lose **some of my free time** if I come to church...or if I read my Bible...or if I volunteer to do some ministry or project at church.

Besides, serving others can be **messy** sometimes. In fact, at times it literally stinks!’

Here’s a 2<sup>nd</sup> parallel between those present at Jesus’ birth and us now:

#### B. They didn’t see any benefit for themselves

Again, imagine yourself in the loft with this tug-of-war going on in your mind. ‘I really should help this young couple out. After all, if I was in their shoes, I would want someone to switch spots with me!’

**But then** your thoughts swing the other way. ‘They’re young—and probably **won’t even appreciate** the sacrifice I would be making for them. And **what would I get out of it?** Maybe a warm, fuzzy feeling for doing the right thing, but that will **only last a day or two**. I think I’ll just stay put.’

Isn’t this **another reason** why people don’t make room in their lives for **Jesus now**? They don’t **see the benefit** in serving Him. They don’t see how they get anything “out of the deal,” so to speak. And because they might go **unnoticed**—and underappreciated—it is not worth it, in their minds.

Besides the fact that we should serve the Lord **because we love Him**—not for the recognition of men—and **our labor is not in vain** in the Lord (I Cor 15:58)...and **God does not forget our work** and labour of love (Heb 6:10), I can’t help but think that if a family traded places with Mary and Joseph, they would have had their names—and their act of kindness—recorded in God’s Word. **Why** do I believe that?

Because if Joseph Arimathea was commended for providing a place for Jesus **to be buried**, I think the family—or person—who provided a place for Jesus **to be born** would have been commended, too!

Here’s one last reason people didn’t make room **for Jesus then**—and don’t make room for Him now—and that is this: C. They didn’t believe what was said about Jesus

In fact, I’m of the opinion that if those **who heard** what Joseph said **had believed** what Joseph said, they would have **gladly given up their comfort** to provide a decent birthplace for the Son of God! They would have seen **the great benefit** of honoring God this way—and maybe even been fighting one another to give up their spot!

But... they **didn’t believe what** Joseph said about Jesus, did they?

Sadly, the same **is true now**, isn’t it? Most people don’t believe what God has said about Jesus!

--They don’t believe the fact that **God came to earth as a man**—the man Christ Jesus (I Tim 2:5)

--They don’t believe the reason Jesus came to earth **was to die**—the “just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God” (I Peter 3:18)

--They don’t believe **God’s declaration** regarding Jesus in **Acts 4:12** “Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.”

--Or **Jesus' declaration about Himself** in John 14:6 "...I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me."

--And because they don't believe these things, they certainly don't believe that Jesus **is coming back to judge** them some day!

**The perplexity** of Christmas past—the first Christmas—is that there was **no room** in the inn for Jesus.

Why? Because they didn't believe what Joseph said about Him!

**The parallel** with Christmas present is that to a large degree, **nothing has changed**—there is still no room in most hearts and lives for Jesus. Why? Because they don't believe what God has said about Jesus!

What do I **base that on? Why** do I say that? Call me naïve...or old-fashioned...or simple minded, but I'm of the opinion that on the day we celebrate God coming to earth, the place there should be **no room is church!**

That's not the case, though, is it? Plenty of room at church—but no room in our schedules!

No room **then**; no room **now!** What about you? Have you any room for Jesus?

Notice stanza 4 of "Have You Any Room for Jesus?"

*"Room and time now give to Jesus; soon will pass God's day of grace,  
Soon your heart left cold and silent, and your Savior's pleading cease."*

That's true, isn't it? The time will come when your opportunity to get saved will be past—it will be too late!

God came to earth in the person of Jesus...to die on the cross and pay the penalty He required—and that you deserved. --If you reject Jesus—God's gift—for salvation, God will reject you!

--If you have no room for Jesus now—He will have no room for you in heaven!

2. There's a second truth that this song reminds us of: The time to live for God is now! Make room and time for God now! There are no-do-over's; there are no second chances after we leave this life.