“A SAVIOR HAS BEEN BORN TO YOU”

Luke 2:1–20

Key Verse: 2:11

“Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.”

Merry Christmas! It’s only five days away! Where did Christmas come from, anyway? Over the centuries both the Western (Catholic) and Eastern (Orthodox) Church developed calendars for Sundays throughout the year that celebrated not only important moments in the life of Christ, but also the lives of many great Christian martyrs. Local churches used these holidays to teach, inspire and encourage their members as they struggled to live out their faith in the real world. But eventually there were many fierce struggles about these holidays. Reformers like Zwingi and the Puritans banned celebration of religious holidays altogether because the Bible doesn’t specifically teach us to keep them, and they didn’t like how holidays became mixed with all kinds of pagan elements. Luther, on the other hand, encouraged Christians to celebrate the historic Christian holidays, especially the ones about Jesus. Calvin left it up to the local churches. But of all the historic Christian holidays, generally Christmas and Easter have been considered the holiest. Why? Because Christmas celebrates the very birth of Christ himself, and Easter, his death and resurrection. Because Christmas has become so commercialized, many fervent believers would rather focus on Easter. But if we think about it, without his birth, his death and resurrection would never have been possible. So celebrating the birth of Christ may be the most important holiday of all. Historically it’s called “Advent Season:” four consecutive Sundays leading up to Christmas Day. During Advent Christians all over the world meditate on the meaning of Christ’s birth. For the past three weeks we’ve been studying Isaiah. Isaiah 11 describes the peace Jesus brings; Isaiah 35, the joy he bestows, and Isaiah 40, the hope he gives that renews our strength. Peace, joy and hope are what Christmas is all about. How wonderful, right? But there’s more. Today we want to think about the love that the birth of Jesus shows. His love may be his best and greatest gift of all.

Actually the Bible doesn’t say much about the birth of Jesus. Among the Bible authors Luke gives the most details. The Christmas story most people are familiar with relies heavily on Luke 2, including the manger scene, the angels and the shepherds. Today we want to meditate on why God chose to send his Son to the world in this way, and delve deeper into what it tells us about the love he gives. May God open our hearts and speak to us through his living words.

In verses 1–7 Luke goes into the background and circumstances of what happened. Verses 1–3 are about the historical setting of the Roman census. Verses 4,5 tell of his parents’ journey to Bethlehem. Verses 6,7 describe his birth. There’s much to learn here. First, Luke contrasts Caesar Augustus in verse 1, issuing decrees, with the nameless, poor, helpless baby in a manger in verse 7. Ironically, the baby is the real, everlasting King of the world. Luke also shows God’s sovereignty in using Caesar’s decree to accomplish his own plan to have Jesus born in the town of David, Bethlehem, according to his promise (Mic5:2). Luke also quietly includes some very unusual facts. First of all, Mary is only “pledged to be married” to Joseph, but she’s expecting a child. In conservative cultures this is very much frowned upon, a woman getting pregnant before marriage. In the case of this couple, the baby is not even Joseph’s, as seen in chapter 1. The other unusual fact is that when they arrive in Bethlehem, probably because they had to travel more slowly, there’s “no guest room available” for them. Mary’s baby is the one and only Son of God. There’s no one who ever lived more important than him. But when he was born, he was placed in a manger, an animal’s feedbox, a place no mother would ever want to place her precious newborn child. God was sovereign over this as well.

So why did God cause his Son to be born into such difficulties? Philippians 2:7 says, “…he made himself nothing…” Isaiah 53:3a says, “He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief…” (ESV) God wanted his Son to understand all those who are despised and rejected, all those whose lives are filled with sorrows and grief. We all experience these things to some degree, some people much more than others. But Jesus came to understand the worst of it all. He came to understand those who are always despised, no matter how hard they try, those who’ve experienced suffering and trauma from infancy and are deeply wounded by it. He came to affirm all those who seem not to matter, whom the world ignores, who are so poor and left out in the cold and feel completely alone. Jesus was born in this way to show that these people matter to God, and they should matter to us, also. He was born so humbly so that anyone, no matter how much they’re despised, no matter how much they’ve failed, can come to him and taste that God’s great love is for them, too.

2 Corinthians 8:9 tells us another reason God sent his Son to be born in a manger: “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.” Jesus was born into such a materially poor family not just to identify with poor people, but to make us all spiritually rich. But what does that mean? Here “rich” means rich in the knowledge of his grace. His grace means his great forgiving love. To help us know the greatness of God’s grace, Jesus was born in a manger. Knowing his grace is what makes us spiritually rich, and it’s the best blessing there is. Many people think that to celebrate Christmas, you’ve got to be rich, rich enough to afford everything—the gifts, the decorations, the food, etc. So some people who can’t afford it are even willing to go into debt. But even if we have nothing at Christmas, we can be richer than those who seem to have everything. How? It’s when our souls are filled with his grace. We may have no gifts, no decorations, even no friends or family, but if we have his grace, we’re the richest people in the world. To help us come to know the greatness of his grace, Jesus was born in such a poor, humble way. He came to his people, but nobody welcomed him, so he and his parents were left out where the animals were. It tells us that even though people ignore and reject him, he still humbly wants to give people the best gift: his grace.

Look at verse 8. This is another quiet but surprising part of the story. The news of the birth of Jesus was given to shepherds living out in the fields nearby. Again Luke stresses how God loves to work in humble ways and in humble people (1:52). Shepherding was considered one of the most humble jobs, and these guys were working the night shift. Nobody thought they were important. Look at verse 9. God sent his angel to them, of all people. Not to the elite, not to the intellectuals, not to the ultra-religious, but to ordinary workers on the bottom of society. They were men who had a healthy fear of God (1:50). But the angel didn’t come to scare them; he came to comfort and bless them. Read verse 10. Through the angel’s message God was making humble men like these shepherds the heralds of the good news for all the people of the world.

So what’s the good news? Read verse 11. The good news is that God kept all his promises and finally sent the Savior of the world. From the beginning God promised that he would send a Savior to crush the serpent’s head (Ge3:15). God promised Abraham that all nations on earth would be blessed through him (Ge12:3). God promised David that he would send one of his offspring to establish his eternal kingdom (2Sa7:12,13). This promised one came to be known as “the Messiah,” meaning “the Anointed One,” or “King.” Though Jesus was born in a manger, he was a direct descendant of David, born in the town of David, Bethlehem, born to be our true King, our spiritual King, the King of all peoples on earth. He rules not with force or fear, but with peace, and joy, and hope, and love. It’s what God’s people had been waiting and praying for all along. It seemed God had given up on his people, but he didn’t. The birth of the promised one seemed too fantastic to be true. So the angel continued. Read verse 12. This highly unusual sign of a baby in a manger would help the shepherds realize that what the angel said was really true.

Read verse 11 again. Here we find three titles of Jesus: “Savior,” “Messiah” and “Lord.” We especially want to think about the meaning of Savior. In fact, his name Jesus is the Greek form of the Hebrew name “Joshua,” which means “the Lord saves” (Mt1:21). Luke tells us how the father of John the Baptist, Zechariah, emphasized this salvation. Zechariah said Jesus was coming to be our “horn of salvation” who saves us from all our enemies and enables us to serve God without fear (1:69,71,75). In Greek this word “savior” basically means “deliverer” or “preserver.” In Hebrew this word was used for the judges God raised up to save his people from their Philistine oppressors. In the ancient Greek and Roman worlds the word was associated with their gods whom people believed would save them from enemies or misfortune or diseases. Even the Roman Emperors were called “saviors.” But none of them were real saviors. Though some may have brought people some help, it was temporary, and not so deep. Jesus was born to be the Savior not only of the Jews, but of all the people. According to Luke, he’s the Savior of the poor and the outcasts and the people who really don’t deserve it.

What does Jesus save us from? According to the Bible, he doesn’t promise to save us from political oppression, financial hardship or even from our physical problems. But he does promise to save us from our real problems. What are our real problems? The Bible mentions several: living a meaningless life of suffering in this cursed world is our common problem. Living under the shadow and power of death is another very real problem. And at the core of all our problems, we’re all living under the power of sin. Sin isn’t just terrible behavior. Sin essentially means being cut off from God. That’s where all sin starts. Sin means not honoring God as God nor giving thanks to him (Ro1:21). Sin means living for self, making self the center of our universe in place of God. Sin then progresses into worshiping many other things or people instead of God, and then, into all kinds of moral and ethical misbehavior (Ro1:23–32).

We human beings like to think we can do it on our own, that we don’t need anybody’s help. This is why people have a problem asking for or receiving help from others. Some even die because of this. All the world religions insist that people need to be responsible and make their own moral choices to improve their lives. But Christianity uniquely proclaims God’s saving grace in Jesus our Savior. Only Jesus can save us because only he was born without sin, and only he died for our sins and rose again. Only through his death and resurrection were the powers of sin and death and the curse destroyed and the devil defeated. Only through Jesus our Savior can we receive God’s grace of forgiveness and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Only through Jesus our Savior can we be restored in the image of God. Only through Jesus our Savior can we really serve God. Only through Jesus our Savior can we have a living hope in God’s eternal kingdom. Jesus is also called our “Messiah” and “Lord.” As Messiah, he’s the one who meets all our deepest needs, who quenches the thirst of our souls. As Lord, he’s the Author and Owner of our lives, and the one we really want to live for, the one we really want to obey.

God knows very well how sinful we human beings are. He knows how utterly helpless we are to save ourselves. He knows none of us deserves saving. But God wants to save us anyway. God chose not to condemn us but to save us. For this, God chose to send his precious one and only Son to this world as a most helpless baby in a manger. God sent him to save us from all our sins and all sin’s effects in our lives, all the things from which we could never save ourselves. God sent him to restore us as his own precious sons and daughters and give us eternal victory in him. John 3:16 says, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” This baby would grow up to be a man and would give us the greatest love there ever could be: he laid down his own life for us (Jn15:13).

His birth is such good news that Luke tells us something else that happened. Read verses 13,14. Literally it was an “army” of angels. The baby in the manger was so small and helpless. The shepherds were so weak and insignificant. But there was an army of angels watching. This army angel chorus sang: “Glory to God in the highest heaven.” Why? Because the birth of Jesus reveals God’s greatest glory, his saving love for all kinds of sinners, even the worst ones. They also sang: “…and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.” This peace comes to our souls as a gradual process, to dispel our spiritual darkness like the rising sun in the morning (1:79). The good news of Christmas is that God loves sinners and wants to give us peace with him and peace with one another. This peace is possible because of his great love for us in Jesus.

In verses 15–20 Luke shows how we can experience the true meaning of Christmas. It’s not really through shopping or cooking or singing or being with family. Then how? The shepherds acted on the angel’s message and went to see for themselves. It made them full of joy, and it made them witnesses to others. Ultimately it made them full of praise to God. Likewise, to really experience God’s great love at Christmastime, we’ve got to look into the angels’ message, their words about it, reflect and think deeply about what it all means to us personally.

This Christmas, instead of holding onto our pride, may God help us to open our hearts and welcome Jesus as our Savior. May he help us reflect on the baby in the manger, who was born so humbly, to understand us and show us how much we matter to God. May he renew his saving grace in our souls through the Holy Spirit and give us the assurance of God’s great love for us. May he help us to glorify and praise God and share his great love, especially with those who are wounded and lonely and undeserving like us.