

Time of Grace Ministry
Simply Christmas: A Virgin REALLY Gave Birth
Luke 2: 1-7
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So in your mind, what makes Christmas a classic Christmas? Like what traditions and what experiences, what songs, what shows, what movies make you feel like this isn't June and this isn't September; this is the month, this is the season, and this is Christmas?

I'm guessing the answer to that question is probably different for all of us so let's just kick off the message today with a quick participatory church survey. So how many of you grew up, I'm wondering, decorating a Christmas tree with lights and ornaments with mom or dad? How many of you had to hold the ladder for dad outside as he hung the Christmas lights and used Jesus' name in all the wrong ways? Yeah, a bunch of you. How many grew up making Christmas cookies with mom or with grandma? How many of you grew up eating Christmas cookies that mom or grandma made? How many of you have music that triggers the Christmas memories; you grew up singing Christmas carols, started having Christmas music right after Thanksgiving? Any Pentatonix listeners here today? Classic - yes, you know it's Christmas when you hear the Pentatonix on the radio. How many of you have a classic Christmas movie like The Elf or Grinch or Die Hard or - it is a Christmas movie if you don't know; google it. How many of you will this season watch at least one super predictable, sappy, cheesy Hallmark Christmas movie? I see you back there, sir; thank you for being honest in church. How many of you grew up, like I did in church, with Christmas Eve candlelight, Joy to the World, Silent Night? Yeah, anyone grow up like I did memorizing the Christmas Eve Sunday School program that you can still remember the words? "In those days, Caesar Augustus issued a decree." There's all sorts of Christmas traditions that remind us it's about to be that time of year.

But if I could be a grinch for like just one minute, can I tell you my pet peeve and personal problem with so many of our Christmas traditions? Is that they're just emotion and nothing else. Like we get these nostalgic feelings with the songs and with the shows but so much of what we celebrate is almost like a drug; it gives us this short-term kind of seasonal high because so much of it is based on stuff that didn't really happen. I mean, kids get excited when they sing Frosty the Snowman but, let's face it, Frosty didn't happen and he can't help you that much with life. And my family and I love, you know, getting on the jammies and slugging up in a nest and watching Will Ferrell in Elf, a classic Christmas movie, but it doesn't really help us because Buddy the elf was fictitious; he was a story. If you have any background with church or with the Bible, you might know that there was a guy 2,000 years ago named Luke and he was one of the four guys in the first century that tried to capture what Jesus did and why it mattered in a biography that we call the gospel of Luke.

Now, Luke wasn't an author just looking for another good story. By profession, he was actually a medical doctor; a guy who tended to care a whole lot about facts and maybe this much about the feelings. And the reason that one day he sat down to write like a history of what happened with Jesus is because he had a friend who was interested in the facts. He had heard about Jesus,

it seems like he had come to faith in Jesus, but he wasn't 100 percent sure like was this all real and could he put his hope and his future in Jesus as his Savior?

Let me show you a passage from Luke 1 where we find out why Luke wrote his gospel. He said: "With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught." You know, sometimes here in the 21st century, Christians are famous for their testimony; like here's what God has done for me and here's how I feel about Jesus, so you should feel this way about him, too. But that wasn't Luke's approach. His friend, Theophilus, wasn't certain about his faith so instead of just sharing his testimony, Luke wanted to investigate the actual history. And so he put his medical mind to work. He started from the beginning and he carefully investigated. He found the eyewitnesses, he interviewed and didn't just cobble together a bunch of personal thoughts and emotions. Instead, he decided to write an orderly account so that Theophilus could be certain of his hope, his peace, and his future with Jesus.

And so starting today and for the next few weeks, that's what we're going to do. We're going to start to read this orderly account that Luke wrote so that Theophilus and generations of people after him could be certain about Jesus. So if you're looking for something that lasts past the Christmas season, if you're searching for real answers and real hope and the real story about who Jesus was, why don't you open your Bibles with me today and just follow along on the screen as we jump in for the first time to Luke 2. Here's how the famous story begins. It says: "In those days, Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria and everyone went to their own town to register."

Now if that doesn't sound like the start of Star Wars, it's because it isn't. Remember, a long, long time ago in a galaxy far, far away, this amazing thing happened. That's not what Luke says. He says, "In those days, Caesar Augustus issued a decree." Because they were actual days; like real times, real weeks, from a real year. In fact, historians tell us that this probably happened around the year 5 or 6 B.C. And if your brain is working today, you might say, "Wait, wait, wait - did you say that Jesus Christ was born 5 or 6 years before Christ?" And the answer is, yes, that is what happened. Have you ever heard the name Dionysius Exiguus before? No? Near 525 A.D., Dionysius tried to come up with a whole new way of enumerating human history based on the birth of Jesus Christ. He decided to divide B.C., before Christ, and A.D. Anno Domini, in the year of our Lord, which, as a Christian, I think was an amazing thing to do except good 'ol Dionysius got the date wrong. And so it turns out that Jesus was actually born not like right between B.C. and A.D., but in the year 5 or 6 B.C. We know that historically because Jesus was born during the life of a man named King Herod, who historians tell us died in the year 4 B.C. You might remember King Herod was the king who tried to kill the baby Jesus. So if he died in 4 B.C., he had to be around when Jesus was born and, thus, the date.

And in those days, those real historical days, Caesar Augustus issued a decree because Caesar Augustus actually happened, too. I'll show you one of the statues and the sculptures that has survived the test of time. That's Caesar Augustus. And some of you history buffs might remember his story. He was born Gaius Octavius Thurinus in the year 63 B.C. He became so

famous that the month, August, was actually named after Caesar Augustus. He was adopted by his great uncle, Julius Caesar, if you remember the Ides of March from history class. And it became famous because in the year 27 B.C., he was made the first ever emperor of the Roman Empire. Luke is trying to make a point: That in a real time, in real history, when there was a real emperor and a real governor, a real thing really happened.

And that's a fact which hit me square between the eyes the first time I stepped onto Israeli soil. About a decade ago, I got to take a trip to Israel and it changed my faith forever. It was the week when the Bible that I had been reading went from black and white to color. And it's a time when it really hit me that this is much more than a story; that this is history. We landed in Tele Aviv and our first stop was a port city on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea called Caesarea, which was named after Caesar Augustus. As our tour guide took us to the wonderful colosseum that Herod the Great himself had built to honor Caesar, we stopped and looked at the replica of a stone that had been found in that very place. I took a picture of it and I want to show it to you today. That stone was found by archaeologists in the year 1961 but it dated all the way back to the first century; all the way back to the life of Jesus. And if you could read ancient Latin, you would recognize a name in the second line of that engraving; the name Pontius Pilate. Pontius Pilate, the governor who allowed for the crucifixion of Jesus, was a real person. And when Jesus lived, they really wrote his name on a stone where Pontius Pilate probably lived or ruled when he had to look over that rebellious land known as ancient Judea.

As I looked at that stone on day one of my trip to Israel, it hit me - this happened! Like as a Christian, I suppose I had always believed that but when you're so far away from the times and the places and the people, you start to think this might just be a story like any other. But for that day and the days to come, I started seeing the stones, the pottery, the remnants, the history and I realized Luke was not just some religious guy recording his personal religious experience; he was a historian who cared intensely about what actually happened.

Which means what Luke says next might be one of the most powerful things you hear all week. Look how Luke 2 continues. It says, "So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him, and was expecting a child." Whoa, isn't that amazing? You don't seem too excited just yet. Do you know what Luke was thinking when he wrote those words? Nazareth, Galilee, Bethlehem, Judea, David and a virgin named Mary? He was thinking it's about to happen! If you love geography, you might be interested to know that Nazareth was a dinky, one camel village in northern Israel; a place called Galilee. And Bethlehem was a dinky two camel village in the southern part of Israel called Judea. There was about 90 miles between the two and Luke proves that he knows his history well because he said that Joseph went up because even though he and Mary were traveling south, it's a climb of about 1,400 feet in elevation. So think of that - if you think this is just a story and not history, I think God might send Mary back to earth to punch you right in the mouth because she's eight months pregnant, she's walking or riding three and a half marathons for a climb of 1,400 feet with a baby pushing on her bladder the entire time and she would tell you, "Oh yeah, that happened! This was real history that Luke was recording." And if you know the Old Testament, this is really exciting history. If this was a Wikipedia reference, there would be so many words that would be hyperlinked to the predictions and prophecies of the

Old Testament. Have you heard them before? This has been fascinating to me as I think about my friends who aren't quite sure about the Bible; that if you think the story was made up, that you might be able to explain why Luke wrote this story down, how in the world do you explain all the stuff that was written before it happened and came true to the T?

Do you know the prophecies about the line of David? In 2 Samuel 7:14, God had said, "David, one of your descendants will be a king who will sit on your throne and reign forever and ever." Three hundred years later through the prophet Isaiah 7:14, God said that there would be a virgin who would give birth to that child and he would be called Immanuel, God with us, who would live forever. The prophet Micah, around that same time, 700 years before Christ, said that the little town of Bethlehem would produce one whose origins were from of old; God, from ancient times. The prophet Isaiah explained that that person, God and man, born to be with us and die on the cross for our sins - would shock you when you saw him because there'd be nothing special; no beauty, no majesty to attract us to him, like someone from Nazareth? You'd say, "What? God is from there?" A few chapters later in Isaiah 53, he said that this God, who'd come to be among us, would be pierced for our sins and he would be crushed for the stuff that we messed up. He would be put on a cross. In fact, the prediction of Jesus' crucifixion happened in 1,000 B.C. in the psalms before crucifixion was even invented. And in Isaiah 53 and Psalm 16, a thousand years before Jesus was born, a prediction was made that he would rise from the dead and see the light of life. And so as Luke writes these words, it's not like a boring class in history; it's Luke saying, "It's happening." What our people have been waiting for for centuries, for millennia, it's happening. He is about to be born!

And then he was. Look at the last verses that we see from today. Luke 2:6-7: "While Mary and Joseph were there," in Bethlehem, "the time came for the baby to be born and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger because there was no guest room available for them." Now here's how I know that Luke is committed to the facts and not the feelings because don't you want to know how they were feeling? I mean, when you see the movies trying to depict the birth of Jesus Christ - like if you were the director of the Christmas movie, wouldn't you fire Luke if he was one of your writers? He's such a dud. He's like, "She was pregnant, she had a baby, they put him in a manger, moving on." And I want to say, "No, no, no. What was Mary thinking when Joseph's knocking on the door and he can't find a room and the contractions are coming and she gives birth to a baby? What's going through Joseph's mind as he holds a leg and Mary pushes out the prophesied Son of God? Like we want to know the emotions!" But Luke's not telling you a story to get you emotional; he wants to convince you 2,000 years ago what actually happened; that a child was born who'd been prophesied from forever ago and his mother took him and wrapped him up to keep him alive and warm and set him in a manger. That is what happened.

And if historians are right, it happened here. This next picture is one I took at the Church of the Nativity. It's the oldest surviving Christian church in the land of Israel. It's been standing since Christianity was made legal in the fourth century by the emperor Constantine. The church was built by Constantine's mother, Helena, but it was actually built on top of an ancient pagan temple to the Greek god, Adonis. But even earlier historians, like Justin Martyr, who was born in the year 100 A.D., said the temple to Adonis was built by anti-Christian people who wanted to cover up the pilgrimage site where Jesus was born. And so if you go inside this ancient church and you

enter this doorway down the stairs that's right next to the altar of the main church, you can see the original floor and a spot where for 2,000 years, Christians have been coming to worship where their Savior was born.

So maybe you get my message. Why am I telling you all these stories, reading all these passages, showing you all these pictures, talking about all this history and all this archaeology? If you're taking notes in your program, it's to make the simple point with Dr. Luke that Christmas happened. You might believe it, you might reject it, you might love it, you might hate it, you might celebrate it, you might ignore it, but Christmas happened. And if you care about more than personal experience and private emotion, if you care about historical facts, Luke wants you to know that this happened.

But why should you care? One more quick survey - how many of you loved history class back in high school? Alright, 10 percent of you. Yeah, so that begs the question, why? "Nice history lesson, Pastor. Thank you. Not sure if I'm still awake but that's not my thing so why should I care?" I want to answer before I say "Amen," three reasons why you should care: Because of faith, because of forgiveness, and because of peace. Like if you're interested in faith or forgiveness or peace in the year to come, you should care very, very much that the birth of Jesus happened.

Let me start with faith. If you're at all like so many people that I meet week after week, your relationship with Christians and the church has been complicated. I'm guessing some of you grew up in the church but now you don't want much to do with the church because something happened. There was some place that had the name of Jesus connected to it, some people - maybe your parents or your pastor or your priest who came in the name of Jesus Christ - but something was wrong with them that they didn't seem much like Jesus at all. Maybe you experienced the hypocrisy or the greed or the immorality or the stupid manmade traditions or the legalism and it just soured you on everything connected to Jesus. And if that's been part of your story, I want you to think not about the people but about the events of history. If you've walked away from the church, if you don't read the Bible, if you don't talk to Jesus in prayer, if you don't consider yourself a Christian, can I beg you today to reconsider and think about the history of what happened?

The second reason I want you to take this seriously is because of forgiveness. Because if I can be pretty bold with you today, I would bet there's stuff in your life that has happened that you need to be forgiven for. And I'm thinking today about an experience I recently had with a guy from my soccer league. Some of you know, I play an incredible 35 and over men's soccer league where there are no standings and yet, we take it very, very seriously. A couple weeks ago, I got to the field early and I met this guy from another team that I had never really gotten to know before. And when he found out that I was a Christian and I was a pastor, he told me his spiritual story and I still - like I'm trying to get my brain around what he told me but it stuck with me ever since that conversation. He said that he grew up with a little bit of church experience; he kind of knew the Ten Commandments and the rules. But as he went through life, he kind of lived his life in his twenties and thirties like most guys do in their twenties and thirties. He was about having fun, meeting girls, partying on the weekends, and he didn't think all of it was all that bad. But then one day, he went to this church and he said this pastor was praying for him and while

the pastor was praying for him, something happened; like something supernatural that I still can't explain. He said in an instant, he had this experience where he saw himself sitting in front of this massive screen and on the screen for one hour were replaying the things that had happened in his life; like the words that he had said and the choices that he had made and the people that he had hurt. He said for just one hour, he got to relive the lowlights of his life. And if you would see this guy, I mean, he's a tough - he's a guy that I would not mess with on the field. He's a tough looking dude but he said when I saw what actually happened, the stuff I'd forgotten about, it broke me. And he said he sobbed like a child for 60 minutes and when he snapped out of this experience, he was a changed man.

I've got to tell you, I've never had an experience or a vision like that but here's what I know. If God did the same thing for you, I bet it would break you. If not for 60 minutes, if just for six minutes in the service, God put on this massive screen the stuff that's happened in my life, like the words that I've said and the choices that I've made and the selfish like stuff that I've pushed onto people, I bet I would run through that door and I don't know if I would come back. And if it was your story up there, like those moments you wish you could forget and some of them that didn't seem that serious at all but you could see the people's expressions and faces who got hurt? Like how seriously angry you could be over stuff that really isn't going to matter in the end? A kid who acts like a kid or someone at work who's just an imperfect coworker? If you could see the high standards that you sometimes hold people to and when they don't meet those standards, how quickly you go after them verbally? And yet, when someone comes after you, you're on the defensive so fast - like, if you could see that, I think we would all look at you and say did that actually happen? And you wouldn't need some religious guilt trip. You wouldn't need some manmade rules. Like the simple thing that almost all of us agree on - that we should treat people like we would want to be treated - you would see time and time again that you haven't.

And then you'd care about Christmas. Because what Luke is trying to tell us is that Jesus was born so something bad wouldn't happen to you. That God himself came into our world not to give you a little bit of advice on how to be a better person but to save you and to forgive you. One of the other eyewitnesses of Jesus' story, his friend Matthew, wrote in the Christmas account this: "Mary will give birth to a son and you are to give him the name Jesus because he will save his people from their sins." Do you know that's what the name Jesus or Yeshua means in Hebrew? God saves. Because Jesus came to save you. He came into this world born in an uncomfortable manger, leaving this world on an uncomfortable cross, to forgive you. So that all the footage that would make you feel ashamed and embarrassed, that would make you run and hide from God and the truth, he could highlight and delete it. And Jesus rose from the dead so there would be no reruns in the eyes of God and so you could find this beautiful place that so few people in the world or in the church find. That you wouldn't have to proudly judge others; thinking that you're better than those people out there who don't go to church or thinking that you're so much better than those hypocrites in here who do. Instead, you could confess, "I haven't been a great person. I messed up. I sinned. But I don't have to live with shame because he came into the world to save his people from their sins."

What we tell you week after week, what the Bible says in chapter after chapter, is that because the birth of Jesus happened, your real forgiveness and your real salvation and your real hope

happened too. Luke wants to give you faith. He wants to give you forgiveness and finally, he wants to give you peace.

Have you noticed lately that the world is crazy? There are crazy elections where the president and the house and the senate, everyone's freaking out, there's a stock market that skies and then it crashes and everyone these days is panicking. But you don't have to. Do you know why? Because in the days when Caesar Augustus issued a decree, when a pagan man named Quirinius was governor of Syria, when people who did not love the true God were running the show, do you know what God did? He forgave the world. And if the best thing in human history happened when the world was that messed up, when a woman who was eight months pregnant had her world turned upside down to travel three and a half marathons and climb 1,400 feet, if God can work out his incredible blessings in the worst of times, then you don't have to be afraid either. Then Jesus is not just a great Savior; he could actually be the Prince of Peace. And you could remember no matter what the headlines, no matter what the drama at work, that your Jesus died for your sins and he's seated at the right hand of God to rule over all of history for the good of his people.

See, that's the good news of Christmas. It happened so our faith, forgiveness and peace could happen, too. And so to quote that great theologian Ricky Bobby, I would like to tell you that Christmas, that just happened. It really did and that's really good news! And if you forget that in the crazy, emotional traditions that are about to come the next few weeks, I want you to watch a Charlie Brown Christmas. Have you ever seen it before? Ever since 1965, Charles Schultz's famous depiction of Christmas has been playing on American television. If you know the story, Charlie's panicking because everyone seems infatuated with the stuff that won't last - the gifts and the presents and the cards and the ornaments - and he wants something more out of his Christmas. And so he decides to direct a Christmas play but because Charlie Brown is Charlie Brown, of course everything falls apart until frustrated and angry Charlie Brown yells out, "Does anyone know what Christmas means?" And his friend Linus takes his thumb out of his mouth and he drags his little blanket to center stage and do you know what he says? "In those days, Caesar Augustus issued a decree. And the angel said, 'Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy. Today, in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you.'"

Do you know that in 1965, that was controversial to put on television? The people in Hollywood tried to talk the creator of Charlie Brown, Charles Schultz, out of it but he wouldn't. Do you know why? Because his background was in theology and history and he wanted America to know in the craziness of Christmas that even if Charlie Brown didn't actually happen, Jesus Christ did. And so when life is driving you crazy and you're wondering what the season actually means, you can look at Linus center stage and remember what it does. That in the prophesied town of David, a Savior has been born for you so that faith and forgiveness and peace could happen. Now brothers and sisters, that is really, really good news. So let's pray.

Dear God, I pray today for everyone like Theophilus who has questions about this story; who wonders if it's just another tale we tell ourselves to feel good and find comfort in this short life. I pray that you spark the curiosity and interest in their heart that would lead to just one step that would lead to another that would finally lead to life in Jesus. I pray for everyone here today who

feels ashamed; who thinks they have to run away from you or hide from your people because they've done something that's pretty messed up.

Jesus, you used a tax collector named Matthew and cowardly disciples like John and Mark to write down this story because you wanted us to know that you are a real Savior of people who have really sinned. And I pray today, God, for peace. We're so anxious these days. Despite all the knowledge at our fingertips, we're more depressed and we're more worried about the future and we need to get back to the classic story that there is a God who runs all of human history and he is for us because of Jesus.

So God, give us that faith, give us that forgiveness, and give us that peace. Change hearts and help us to be the kind of force that you always intended the Christian church to be. Not a place of legalistic rules but a place known for its love for the least of these. Help us to be that kind of people, God, that live with such hope and thankfulness towards you that we give and give and give to this world that so desperately needs help. Thank you for bringing us here today. Thank you for speaking clearly to us in your word. We pray that you'd bless us today and through this holiday season and long past it. We ask it all in Jesus' name, Amen.



TIME OF GRACE®

Simply Christmas: A Virgin REALLY Gave Birth

Study Notes

Summary

Many people view Christmas as a season of wishes, dreams, and heartwarming tales. Rudolph, Frosty, Tiny Tim, and other fictional figures give us hope and make us feel good. But the Christian story of Christmas is radically different. Luke's investigation was about facts, not feelings. Luke 2 gives us the real people, real places, and real hope that we find in a real, historical Jesus. This message reminds us that Jesus' birth actually happened, which is heartwarming news!

- **Luke 1:3,4:** ³With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.
- **Luke 2:1-7:** ¹In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. ²(This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) ³And everyone went to their own town to register. ⁴So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. ⁵He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, ⁷and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.
- Christmas _____.
- **Matthew 1:21:** She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.

Points to Ponder

1. Agree/Disagree: Without its basis in history, Christianity is no more than empty emotion.

2. Read Luke's introduction to his gospel in Luke 1:1-4. Find three words/phrases that would be intriguing to a friend who has doubts about the truth of Christianity.

3. Study Peter's famous message from Acts 2, which God used to bring three thousand people to faith in Jesus. What connections do you see between Peter's approach and Luke's writing?

Homework for Next Week

Read Luke 2:8-10.

"In the Christian view, the ultimate evidence for the existence of God is Jesus Christ. If there is a God, we characters in his play have to hope that he put some information about himself in the play. But Christians believe he did more than give us information. He wrote himself into the play as the main character in history, when Jesus was born in a manger and rose from the dead."

—Timothy Keller, The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism