

The good and the bad of Jesus' birth (Luke 2:1–7; reading Matthew 2)

Luke in his gospel recounts that which God had fully accomplished in the earthly ministry of Jesus (Luke 1:1). God would provide in Christ forgiveness of sins for all who believe and repent (cf. 24:47). The Creator entered creation to eventually give His life as a ransom. The birth of Jesus Christ was up to that point in time the greatest act of God for mankind since creation. Jesus's obscure birth and its difficult circumstances were by God's plan, according to His promises, and accompanied by His provision. Marvel at the birth of Jesus and learn to trust God's goodness toward His children.

I. *Recognize God's providence.*

1. *The chronological time-frame:* Mid-way in the reign of Caesar Augustus (27 B.C. to A.D. 14), sometime before the death of Herod the Great (ca. 4 B.C., cf. 1:5), Augustus decreed a registration, probably a census for the purpose of taxation.
2. *The political and social situation:* Israel was under Roman occupation, the fourth and terrifying beast of Daniel's vision (Daniel 7:7). Soldiers were known for extortion (Luke 3:14), could interrogate with scourging, force service from civilians, and at times took sport in causing pain and mocking prisoners (cf. Matthew 27:26–30). Herod the Great in turn was a murderous tyrant (cf. Matthew 2:16).

Marvel at the providence of God who used a cruel, pagan, unknowing government to move Joseph and Mary from Nazareth to Bethlehem to fulfil His plan (Micah 5:2).

II. *Remember God's promises.*

Joseph and Mary had direct promises from God and knew with the populace Old Testament prophetic promises that could have comforted and helped them.

1. *Promises they could, or should have, remembered on the way to Bethlehem:*
 - a. God promised concerning King David that God would establish his house and throne forever in the person of the Messiah (2 Samuel 7:11, 16, 26–27; Isaiah 9:6–7). This was known to the populace (cf. Matthew 12:23; 15:22; 20:30–31; 21:9, 15; 22:42) and repeated to Mary and Joseph (Luke 1:32–33; cf. Matthew 1:20).
 - b. God promised that Bethlehem would be the Messiah's birthplace (Micah 5:2), a fact known also by the scribes (Matthew 2:5–6) and the populace (John 7:42).
 - c. God promised concerning Jesus that He was conceived by the Holy Spirit, would save His people, and be called Son of the Most High, the Son of God (Matthew 1:21–21; Luke 1:32–35).

Certainly God would care for this miraculous child, the promised Savior and Messiah-King and the trip He planned. God keeps His word and is keeping it even in your difficulties.

2. *Helpful prophecy they might not have known:* They would eventually return to Nazareth after a stay in Egypt, which according to Matthew happened to fulfil prophecy (Matthew 2:23). Prophets foretold that the Messiah would be despised (e.g., Isaiah 52:13–53:12) and thus disreputable Nazareth would give Jesus the name "Nazarene." This with the impoverished conditions of Jesus' birth belonged to His role as the Suffering Servant.

III. *Accept God's provision.*

1. *God provided, for the parents, the bare minimum in physical comfort.* They lodged with the animals and placed Jesus in a manger. Their poverty is clear from their subsequent offering at the Temple (Luke 2:24).
2. *God provided, unknown to the parents, a sign of the child's birth.* That manger-crib was a sign to nearby shepherds to find the child and who then brought the angelic message to Joseph and Mary reminding them that the child was the Savior, Christ the Lord (Luke 2:11–12, 17).
3. *God provided, beyond the parents, identification with the lowly.* It was a lowly birth representing the glory set aside, the poverty which Jesus embraced, in order to make believers rich with all spiritual blessings (2 Corinthians 8:9).

Rejoice in His humiliation, because it was for us and have His attitude in order to serve as He has (Philippians 2:1–12; 2 Corinthians 1:4).

God did more than send His Son, He "gave him up for us all" (Romans 8:32). That is, Jesus died as a sacrifice for our sin, that we might have life and forgiveness of sin. This is what God accomplished in Jesus and Luke reports.

Questions for further thought and discussion: • How should knowing God's sovereign providential rule help us respond to difficulties (and specifically undesirable restrictions at this time)? • What promises encourage you in challenging times to be at peace and have joy? Share them with others. • Contrast the "good" and the "bad" of Jesus' birth. How can this give us perspective for faithful living?