

A Baby in a Manger
Luke 2:1-7
Key Verse: 2:7

by Mark Vucekovich

"...she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn."

Merry Christmas everyone! Today we're going to be looking at a famous chapter in the Bible about the birth of Jesus. It tells us some very interesting facts surrounding his birth. But the fact we want to think about most is that when he was born, Jesus was laid in a manger. The manger is repeated in this chapter three times (7,12,16). A manger is an animal's feedbox. The Department of Children and Family Services would not advise us to put a newborn baby into such a germ-infested place. No mother would choose such a place for her new baby. A baby in a manger was so unusual that verse 12 calls it God's "sign." It wasn't just a sign back then; it is still a "sign" for all of us. What does the sign of the manger mean to us? When we find the answer to this question, we can know the true meaning of Christmas. May God speak to us personally today.

Verse 1a begins with the phrase "In those days..." "In those days" is a poetic way of introducing a heart-moving story; it also refers to the amazing things God had been doing in chapter 1. God had helped a priestly senior citizen couple named Zechariah and Elizabeth to give birth to a son! Their son, John the Baptist, would prepare the way for the long-awaited Messiah. God also had helped a virgin named Mary to give up her dream of a private, happy life with her fiancé! Instead, she would bear the Savior before marriage. "In those days" the time had fully come for God to send his Son to be born of a woman (Gal4:4). Both Mary and Zechariah sang beautiful songs of praise to God.

But chapter 2 opens on a quite different note. Look at verse 1. The main person here is "Caesar Augustus." To appreciate the baby in the manger in verse 7, we first have to know about "Caesar Augustus" in verse 1. He was the first of many "Caesars" in the history of the Roman Empire. Through clever manipulation he took power away from the Roman Senate. They, in fear, honored him with the title: "Augustus." It was a religious title bordering on calling him a "god." He was the one who coined the famous slogan "Pax Romana," "the peace of Rome." He promised countries that they could enjoy stability and prosperity if they joined his empire. But "Pax Romana" was a disguise for military threat; those who didn't join would get the sword. In verse 1 "the entire Roman world" included all the countries surrounding the Mediterranean Sea. It was hard for Caesar to maintain his empire because he was always short of money. So he developed a system of taxes, calling for a census from time to time. Taxes brought wealth, glory and luxury to Roman cities. But they were not popular among the colonial people, who had to pay them but had no access to such privilege. Look at verse 3. At Caesar's decree, millions of people had to stop whatever they were doing and go to their hometowns to register. Luke quietly shows us how people were oppressed.

Look at verses 4-5. In contrast to Caesar Augustus, Joseph was an ordinary man. He worked with his own hands as a carpenter in a small town Nazareth in Galilee. His family was originally from Bethlehem in Judea. So to register for the census he suddenly had to close his carpentry shop and make an 80-mile trip. They had no minivans. Using pack animals it would take at least three days. His fiancée Mary went with him. Luke again draws our attention to the fact that Mary was pregnant but only "pledged to be married" to Joseph. In their strict moral society, they were scandalous. Though Mary had become pregnant without him, Joseph had denied his feelings and accepted God's mission to protect her and the baby (Mt1:18-25). But the trip would be dangerous for Mary at the end of her pregnancy. Why did Joseph take her along? Maybe he worried about the townspeople of Nazareth trying to stone her if he were not there. Maybe Mary wanted to be with him when the baby was born. Or maybe it shows how impersonal and ruthless the Roman rule was, to force a pregnant woman to do this.

The author suggests another reason why Mary made the trip to Bethlehem. Look at verse 4 again. Bethlehem was "the town of David." Joseph was from "the house and line of David." Why the emphasis on David? It tells us that God was fulfilling all his promises to David. In the Old Testament David was deeply in love with God, and he had a genuine compassion for his people. God was so pleased that he promised to raise up one of his descendants some day, to rule over his people with peace and love, and that his kingdom would last forever (2Sa7:12-13). It became famous as the promise of the Messiah. Though they suffered a lot, the people of faith down through history were longing for this promise of the Messiah to come true. Through the prophet Micah God had promised that the

Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, the town of David (Mic5:2; Mt2:5-6). Now, through this census, Joseph and Mary were on their way to Bethlehem. It shows us that God is the Sovereign Ruler. Caesar had issued the decree. But God was really in control, fulfilling his promises. It teaches an important lesson. Sometimes we seem to be in a fog of difficulties. We can't see what it all means; we worry or get discouraged or burdened. We need to learn the faith that, even in the midst of injustice or oppression, God is in control, working out his own good purposes.

Read verses 6,7. Due to Mary's condition Joseph had to travel more slowly than everyone else. So by the time they arrived, all the local motels had switched their signs from "Vacancy" to "No Vacancy." What a hard time Joseph must have had trying to find a room! Rich people no doubt arrived fashionably late, threw down bundles of money and had poor people kicked out of their rooms. Joseph, living on a carpenter's salary, had no means to do that. We know the family was struggling financially because later, when they had to make an offering for their newborn boy, they brought the offering of the poor (2:24; cf. Lev12:8). Finally, when the time came for the baby to be born, there was no available room for Mary. No one bothered to notice her. No one offered to share a room. No one cared even if she died during childbirth in a cold, dark alley somewhere. People's hard situations made their hearts hard and cold. It seems she ended up giving birth where the animals were housed. It was not a bright, warm place like on the Christmas cards; it was a dark, dirty place. How demeaning it must have been to deliver her firstborn son among the animals, with no one to help her! After the baby was born, she herself had to wrap him in strips of cloth. Without a place to put him, she borrowed a manger, an animal's feedbox.

And who is it that was born in such a miserable way? The angel had said, "...the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God" (1:35b). He was way more than just a great man or a great king. John 1 tells us who Jesus really is: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made...The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (Jn1:1-3,14a). Why did God come to this world not just as a man but also in this most humiliating way? It seems almost criminal. But God had his own purposes. We learn several things.

First, Jesus understands us. Luke's Gospel shows how Jesus came for social outcasts. To do so, he identified with them even at his birth. His parents had no privilege. He was born under a cloud of shame. His birth was ignored. Even from birth he "was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering" (Ps22:6; Isa53:3). People born into riches, sheltered from life's agonies find it hard to understand others. On the other hand, orphans or widows feel that no one really understands their hearts. Young people feel the older people don't understand. Anyone left out or lonely feels like others don't understand. But Jesus born in a manger truly understands, because he himself experienced all we do. He "shared in our humanity"; he "was made like us in every way"; he can "understand our weaknesses" (Heb2:14,17; 4:15a). Jesus born in a manger understands despised, rejected, sorrowful, lonely people. Whatever we may be going through, we can come to Jesus. He understands deeply, and he cares.

Second, Jesus became poor to make us rich. If we are honest we will admit it: we all would like to be rich. Many college students dream to become rich. If we had to choose to be permanently poor the rest of our lives, we all would struggle. Poverty is difficult. Poverty is embarrassing. Talking about getting rich gets people's attention; if we talk about becoming poor, people will tune us out. But the Christmas message is that God sent his Son to a poor family to be born in the poorest place--a manger. Why? 2 Corinthians 8:9 explains: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you, through his poverty, might become rich." We've all heard of "rags to riches" stories. After finishing Columbia University, Barack Obama moved to Chicago and lived briefly as a community organizer on a very small salary. But things quickly changed when we went to Harvard Law School. Jesus was different. He was poor not just at his birth, but his entire life. After working as a carpenter like his father, he left his humble job to serve the needy. He lived poorly with his disciples, depending on the financial support of women (8:3b). Once he described his poverty: "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head" (9:58). His poverty went to its lowest point when he died on a cross, pouring out all his lifeblood.

But how does Jesus' poverty make us rich? Believing in him does not promise us a big bank account. The only way to understand it is when we think about poverty and riches spiritually. Who are the poor, really? Ironically, rich people are often the poorest spiritually. However, whether we are rich or poor, we "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Ro3:23). All of us are spiritually poor due to our sins. What is sin? It is not just breaking moral

rules; sin is a broken relationship with God. If our relationship with God is broken, we are spiritually poor, regardless of who we are. The Pharisees of Jesus' day were the most religious, studying Scripture, observing holy days and fasts--even praying. But they were spiritually the poorest because they had no personal relationship with God. There is nothing we can do to get out of our spiritually poor state. So Jesus was born as a baby in a manger. God sent his own Son to be born in a manger to show how much he loves us, no matter who we are. 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." Here the word "whoever" is key. No matter how proud, sinful, rebellious or ugly we have been, Jesus came as a humble baby in a manger for us. He became poor for us, to restore our broken relationship with God. Ultimately, on the cross he forgave and cleansed all our sins. He adopted us as his own children, as heavenly princes and princesses. When we open our hearts, repent and believe in him, the love of God fills our souls. This is what it means that through his poverty we become spiritually rich. Even amidst material affluence so many people feel poor. So many hunger for significance. So many are angry, or bitter. They do outrageous or crooked things and get worse. They seem unreachable. But Jesus was born in the lowest, most humiliating place--a manger--to reach the emptiest, loneliest, angriest, most bitter person. No matter who we are, if we think about the baby in the manger, we discover that God loves us so dearly. As our awareness of God's love grows, the sicknesses in our souls are healed. There was a young woman who was so pretty she worked as a fashion model. But she was spiritually poor. She hated herself. She got into drugs and couldn't study. But she began Bible study and came to believe in Jesus. His grace made her life spiritually rich. Amazingly, she became a loving wife, mother and a missionary who opens her home to serve students and church members sacrificially. There was a young man who was so bright that as a young child he could master a Rubik's cube. But he was spiritually poor without a relationship with God. In college he became a party animal; his life started to unravel until he came close to taking a whole bottle of pills. He went to Japan to work as a programmer. But a faithful servant of God continued Bible study with him over the internet. He grew in Christ until he could decide to dedicate his life as a permanent missionary to Japan. He became spiritually rich. This Christmas may God help us to receive the best gift: his great love through the baby in the manger.

Third, the spirit of the manger. The manger symbolizes God's great love for all forgotten, suffering and sin-sick people. It also symbolizes the lifestyle of those who follow Jesus. We call it "the spirit of the manger." What does it mean? First of all, the spirit of the manger is humility. In the manger Jesus gave up all his power, glory and honor and "made himself nothing" (Php2:7a). People did not recognize him or even give his mother a room. But he came to them anyway, in a most humble way. The baby in the manger is so lovely and humble that he can melt even the hardest heart. Whenever we interact with others, pride on both sides so often gets in the way. People are always competing to step up, not to step down. Jesus invites us all to come to him and learn his humble, gentle heart (Mt11:29). We need to learn the spirit of the manger because God works through humility. Secondly, the spirit of the manger is self-sacrifice. The spirit of the world is, "Take care of yourself first." But the spirit of Jesus is, "Sacrifice yourself first." In the manger Jesus sacrificed himself for others. During his lifetime everyone came to know that Jesus was someone who saved others but did not save himself. He served not with any hidden agenda, but purely, out of sincere love. In brief, the manger of Jesus symbolizes humbly serving all kinds of people. He calls us to do likewise.

Christianity first penetrated the Roman Empire through the spirit of the manger. Christians gathered in catacombs and humbly served whoever joined them. But when Emperor Constantine made it the official state religion, Christianity lost the spirit of the manger. The church began to focus on building projects and on church power and politics. Historically, whenever the church was renewed, it was when it came back to the spirit of the manger. There was a promising young couple. The husband was the son of a pharmacist; the wife, the daughter of a surgeon. They could have lived a comfortable, private life. But during college they met Jesus and decided to serve him. They lived in a tiny apartment above their worship area for 14 years and were always with broken young people. So many received new life in Jesus through them. There was a man who went to work in the Korean Embassy in Nigeria as a lay missionary. He could have lived in a safe, comfortable area. But he decided instead to live among university students. It meant quitting his secure job, moving to a dangerous area and being robbed. He did not focus on clever ministry methods, but on practicing the manger spirit of Jesus. Students' hearts were moved, and many became disciples of Jesus. Jesus still calls us to humbly serve needy college students until they become spiritually rich in Christ. We tend to think God is working only in mega-churches. But God loves to work in places like the manger. UBF is mainly a house church ministry. Families live near a campus and open their homes to serve a few needy students with prayer, the love of God and the word of God. Sometimes they wonder if they are even really a church.

But in light of this passage, they are main characters in the work and history of God in our time. Caesar Augustus with all his power, glory and wealth disappeared, but the humble, poor and rejected baby in a manger became the King and Savior of the whole world.

In our time, the recent worldwide economic crisis has put money on everybody's minds. It also has made people fearful. So many have lost a large portion of their life savings and retirement money. Financial hardship can make people's hearts hard and cold. But in light of this passage, the time of economic hardship is a great chance for us to come back to the manger of Jesus and learn the spirit of the manger.

In conclusion, let's think about the contrast between Caesar Augustus and the baby in the manger. Caesar ruled with false peace and with military power. The baby in the manger rules with true peace and with the love of God. Caesar used his power to make use of people for his own glory. Jesus surrendered his power to serve people for their benefit. They called Caesar a "god," even though he was nothing but a fallen man. Jesus really is God and Savior of all peoples of all nations. This contrast confronts us with a choice: Do we want to be like Caesar Augustus, or like the baby in the manger? We should think about that question deeply and make the right choice. Today let's accept the baby in the manger personally. Let's decide to imitate his manger lifestyle.