

Luke Chapter 2 v 1 - 7

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Preacher: Peter Robinson

- [0 : 0 0] Or Battle Royals Good morning. Welcome, a special welcome to folk visiting us over the Christmas period.
- And I trust that you have a lovely Christmas. I know some folk from Cheshire here, they're staying up on the moors over the Christmas week. And for other folk as well, some of our folk of course are away visiting family and friends.
- Some over across the pond in USA and Canada. Others are different parts of the country too. But those of you who are here, we welcome you and trust that together in God's presence we may know his encouragement and blessing as we particularly set our minds and think about the coming of his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, into this world.
- The verse there that I've chosen to remind us that all these things happened, not by accident, but in God's perfect plan and timing. Paul the Apostle writes, but when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son.
- God's timing. Timing is very important, isn't it? At Christmas, making sure you get your Christmas cards in the post so they arrive before Christmas Day. Putting the turkey on for the right set of time, so it doesn't burn or come out raw.
- [1 : 4 4] But God's timing was perfect. Just the right time. And God's plan from the beginning of the world was to send his Son into this world to bring salvation to us.
- And at just the right time he came and brought that salvation by his life and death. Well, let's sing together a carol this morning.
- 197, reminding us of those wise men of old who came to Jesus to worship him. And in that same way, we are coming this morning to worship and to praise the Lord Jesus Christ.
- 197, as with gladness, men of old did the guiding star behold. Amen. Because the Son of God came into this world, came to us, he has made the way for us to come to God.
- And let's do that as we pray together now. Let us pray. Amen.
- [3 : 2 1] This world, this dark world, this struggling and painful world. Because he came to reveal to us and make known to us the reality and the truth that you are God.
- And because he came to rescue and deliver us from ourselves and our sin. We thank you that this morning we can draw near to you. Thank you that the way has been made for us through Jesus.
- That the barrier, the hurdle, the huge wall that separates us from you has been broken through by Jesus. We could never break through that wall because that wall was of our own making.
- Of our own selfishness and pride and greed and sin. Lord, we've built up that wall to separate ourselves from you. We are the ones who have rejected you. We are the ones who have determined to live our lives without you.
- Yet, Lord, you were not willing for that wall to remain in place. You were not willing for that separation to continue. But you yourself came. And with great cost and great pain, Lord Jesus.

[4 : 29] Because you died for us. You have made this wonderful way by which we can be forgiven. This wonderful way by which we can know you and enjoy you.

When we see you for who you are, our own imagination of what you are like is so wildly wrong. Because, oh Lord, you are not the despot that we make you out to be.

You're not the weak and insipid God that we pretend that you are. You're not indifferent or uncaring or unloving. You are the God who blows our minds, who causes us to stand in awe.

For you are the God who has loved us with an everlasting love. A love, oh Lord, which is willing to cleanse, willing to heal, willing to deliver, willing to save.

A love which is determined to have us at any cost. And to restore us to yourself, the God who made us. And so, Lord, as we come to think about your Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

[5 : 32] And to remember his entrance into this world. We pray that, oh Lord, you would speak to us in such a way that where we have not given you entrance into our lives.

That, oh Lord, you would remove those blockages from our minds and our hearts. That pride that still stands and says, I don't need you. That selfishness that says, I want my way, not God's way.

Lord, those things that have prevented us and kept us in the dark. Lord, shine your light, we pray. And meet with us this morning, we ask. That we might worship and adore you as those wise men of old did.

That we might glory in you and give to you the greatest treasure of our lives. Which is our love. Our faith. Our trust. Our obedience.

Oh, come Lord, by your Holy Spirit, we ask. Ask even upon this time. And do us good. For we know that is your great desire. And we ask it all. In the name of Jesus Christ.

[6 : 32] Amen. Amen. We're going to read briefly from Luke and chapter 2. The first seven verses. Speaking of the events surrounding the birth of Christ. It's page 1027, if you've got one of the church Bibles. Page 1027. Luke chapter 2, 1 to 7.

Just to say, while you're looking for that, that tomorrow morning, Christmas morning. It probably won't be an hour. It'll probably be about 45 minutes or so. We'll sing some carols. It'll be a short message. But also, what we usually do is, if you're here, and it doesn't matter what age you are, bring along one of your presents if you've opened them.

And particularly boys and girls, bring along one of your presents to show. We tend to have a little show and tell on presents on Christmas morning. So please do that if you can.

And again, tonight it's Christmas Eve. So we had our carol service last Sunday night. That was great. But we'll still be singing lots of carols tonight. And continuing to think about the Lord Jesus and his coming into this world.

[7 : 42] And what it means for us. So please join us if you can at 6. So Luke 2, beginning at verse 1. I'm reading through to verse 7. 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. 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. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born.

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.

We'll think about these things in a moment or two. So if the children or young people would like to go out to their activities, crash and Sunday school, then please do so now.

[8 : 54] If you have a Bible to hand, it's probably helpful for you to have Luke 2, those first seven verses open.

We've been going through the Gospel of Luke in these last several weeks, and we came to the end of chapter one last week. How much do the gifts that we give at Christmas have to say about us?

So if we give somebody a gift which is really expensive, is it telling the other person, or is it showing and revealing that we want to be liked, we want to be accepted, we want to be pleasing to them?

Or is it that we give the gift because we want to show how generous we are or how rich we are? Or does it actually work the other way? Do the gifts that we give actually speak volumes about what we think of the person we're given the gift to?

So if we buy them toiletries, shampoo, shower gel, aftershave, are we subtly trying to tell them, you should shower just a bit more often?

[10 : 20] What we do displays who we are. What we do on the outward reveals the inward. As we've looked through Luke's Gospel so far in chapter one, we've seen that the character of God is seen in what he does.

The way that God works and acts in these events in the life of Zechariah, Elizabeth and Mary and so on, all point to the very nature, the character, the sort of God that we've put our faith and trust in.

That he's a God who keeps his promises. That he's a God who works in history. That he's a God who has a plan and a purpose. That he's a God who comes to send his son to bless and to save and so on.

So God is seen in what he does. We know what God is like, but there are things that he does. Just like all of us.

What we are on the outside reveals and speaks volumes about what is on the inside. Jesus made that uncomfortable truth all the more plain when he said this in Matthew 15.

[11 : 25] Out of the heart comes evil thoughts, murder, adultery, immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.

It's the heart which is the source of who we are. It's the inward that is manifest in the outward. That's why it's so absolutely essential for every single one of us to be transformed inwardly by God's Holy Spirit.

The heart is the problem. The heart causes the misery. The heart brings out the suffering, the sadness, the betrayal. And if it's the heart that's the problem, then no amount of outward change can change the heart.

No amount of things that we do externally to ourselves can deal with the problem of our hearts. This terminal illness is within, deep within, and so operating on the surface won't affect it.

That's how many people think. They think that if we do something in the outward, it will change the inward. To make myself a better person, I'll change my lifestyle, the way that I do things.

[12 : 37] I'll alter my habits. I'll practice this way of behaving. I'll make a New Year's resolution. I'll follow a different path. And somehow by doing these things externally, I will save myself, transform myself, change myself, be a better person.

But the reality is that there's nothing that you and I can do, not even coming to church on Christmas Eve, not even reading your Bible or saying your prayers, or giving your tithe, your money.

There's no good thing, and those are good things, there's no good thing that we can do that will heal our hearts or even set us on the road to recovery, that will start things getting better.

We must, according to Jesus, be born again. John chapter 3. We must, in the words of the Apostle Paul, experience a new creation.

Galatians chapter 6. We must, according to the prophet Ezekiel, receive a new heart and a new spirit.

[13 : 48] Ezekiel 36. That's the essential work that God must do in the life of every single one of us, and that's the work that God does do that brings us to become a Christian.

Unless God performs a spiritual heart transplant in us, we will die in our sin, cut off from God.

But the big question is this, how does God accomplish that? How does God bring about that transformation and change in a person's life? What does God do?

How does he work? And so we come to the birth of Jesus Christ. Everything that we read about surrounding the events of the birth of Jesus is important.

Every single thing that we read of that Luke records here in great detail, and he goes to some length to make sure that we know what he's talking about and when he's talking about it, is there to show us the fingerprints of God.

[14 : 55] His hands, as it were, are in every part, every aspect, every detail. We can see that God is there. Everything matters.

Everything is important. Because here God is working for the salvation of sinners. Here God is doing something which is the essential work to transform the heart of men and women.

So let's look at this for a moment together. Beginning at verse 1, we're told about this decision that Caesar Augustus issued a decree. A decision to command that there be a census taken of the entire Roman world.

We know this Caesar by another name, Octavius. He ruled up till about 14 AD.

We know that he was a great administrator, a great organizer, and so it's not unfamiliar for us to know that he took this census.

[16 : 00] And we're told in those days, in other words, at that time, he decided to take a census. And you can imagine, if we can for a moment, the whole administrative power of the Roman Empire is put into action.

Messengers are sent out from Rome with commands from the emperor to all the local regional leaders telling them that they must now organize a census.

So they have to travel, some to the very northernmost of England, some to North Africa, from the very furthest Middle East, right up to the Atlantic coast in Western Europe.

Messengers are sent and take these pieces of paper, these commands from the emperor. Thousands upon thousands of officials are made to work. Millions of ordinary people's lives are disrupted and forced to leave their daily employment and routines and go where they have to be counted.

Does Luke record this because it's just a whim of the emperor? This is just something that the most powerful man on earth decided?

[17 : 17] No. This was taking place because God had promised and planned that his son, the Messiah, should be born in Bethlehem. All the leaders of God's people, all the leaders of Israel, knew that God had promised that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem.

When King Herod was asked where was he to be born, his religious leaders told him, the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem in Judea, they replied, for this is what the prophet has written, but you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah, for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people, Israel.

They're quoting from Micah, the prophet, hundreds and hundreds of years writing beforehand that the Messiah, the King, the ruler that God would send would be born in Bethlehem.

But how is he to be born in Bethlehem when his mother is living in Nazareth, 90 miles away? What's God going to do to get her there? He's going to control the very whims of the leader, the most powerful man in the whole world of that day, to call a census so that her being fiancé, who was from the house of David, would have to take her and go down to Bethlehem and there she would give birth.

I don't want you to miss the importance of this, the fact that here we have God controlling the big things of the world. God's. See, it doesn't matter what the superpower leader is in position.

[19 : 02] It doesn't matter what rulers, authorities there are in this world who think that they can control and manipulate the world and manipulate other people to bring about what they want.

Ultimately, the Bible teaches us here and elsewhere that God is the one who is in control of the history of this world. Every single one of those powerful leaders is at the beck and call of God to do what he chooses when he chooses.

Now, please don't misunderstand me into thinking that when they act wickedly and evilly that somehow God is controlling them to do that. But here, when God has a purpose and a plan, he will use them to bring it into being.

The big things of this world are under the command of God. Why? So that he might save men and women and boys and girls. This world is not spiraling out of control.

It is the hands of God. There's no empire, there's no army, there's no dictator, there's no regime, there's no parliament or president on earth who does not serve the purposes of God that he might save those that are lost.

[20 : 12] Now, you might say to me, well, it's just chance. It's just chance that the emperor called this census at this time. It's just chance that Joseph had to travel down to Bethlehem and give birth to Mary.

It's all been conspired by the writers. It's not God's handiwork. It's not God governing his actions. But you haven't taken into account the timing if you think that way.

Think about it. The timing had to be absolutely pinpoint accurate. If this census had taken place a month later, Mary would have given birth in Nazareth.

And if this census had taken place just a little later, Mary probably wouldn't have been able to travel the 90 miles almost certainly by foot from Nazareth to Jerusalem.

And even if she had the little donkey, it still would have been impossible for her to travel. The timing speaks to us of someone who has his finger on the pulse.

[21 : 18] The timing speaks to us of a God who's in control. In all the lines of communication, in all those messengers being sent around the world, and those that came to the Middle East and came to Jerusalem and came and gave the orders, everything was organized by God so that at just the right time, Mary and Joseph should travel to Bethlehem.

At just the right time, the Son of God promised from long ago should be born not in Nazareth, but in Bethlehem. And so we read there, while they were there, the time came for the baby to be born.

Surely it makes much better sense to recognize the overruling hand of God than to simply put it down to dumb luck, coincidence, and chance. So we see that God is the God in control.

And he's controlling things to bring salvation to sinners. Then we get to verse 7. And we come to this event, the birth of Jesus.

They get to Bethlehem, Mary and Joseph, after this 90 miles travel, and everywhere is full. Naturally, people are going there from other parts of the country.

[22 : 44] People are going and staying with their families, their loved ones, their friends. They're going there to be registered in the census. And so when Joseph and Mary arrive there, everywhere's full.

Everywhere's full. Wherever they go, it's full. And so, the only place that can be found for Mary, where she can have a little bit of privacy to give birth, doesn't want to be in a jam-packed room with 30 other families, the only place for her is where the animals are kept.

Usually, that was part of the house. Usually, it was part of the ground floor of the house. The animals would be there. Perhaps some cattle, a donkey, that's probably about all.

And then people would live above that. But she was unable to go to, have room in the house and show she was in that stable part where the animals were.

And she gives birth to the Son of God. That doesn't sound very well planned to me, does it? To you? Haven't God taken that into account when he moved Caesar to command the census?

[23 : 58] Surely, if God was planning this out to the detail, like I'm saying and the Bible is saying, then he would realize Bethlehem would be overcrowded and surely there'd be nowhere suitable for Jesus to be born.

Surely, he who commands emperors would have arranged for there to be a room, a place for them to stay, somewhere a bit more comfortable than this, than a stable, a place where there was no bed for the baby but had to be put in this trough, this animal feed place.

Of course, God could have done that. Of course, could have done that if he wanted to. God arranged everything. He arranged all the timing. He arranged everything perfectly. But he arranged it so that his son, the Messiah, Jesus Christ, should be born in the stable.

Why? Why did God arrange it in that way? Why did God work in that way? So that from the beginning of the birth of Christ, from the beginning of his life, we might see that Jesus Christ was not wanted.

when God came to this world, he was not met with acceptance, he was not met with a red carpet, he was not met with a royal announcement, he was not met with a warm welcome, we're simply told there was no room.

[25 : 18] When God, the maker of all the earth, came into this world, he came to be rejected. He came to be unwanted. Perhaps you think I'm overstating that.

Perhaps you think I'm making too much of the birth in a stable and laying in a manger, but just think about the whole of Jesus' life. Everything about it from that moment on was one of rejection, was one of being unwelcome.

When the Apostle John writes in his introduction to the life of Jesus, he describes Jesus in this way and what happened to him. He says, he was in the world, that's Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him.

He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Hear the words of Jesus himself when people came to him and made very shallow promises, say, I'll follow you wherever you go.

Jesus said to them, foxes of dens and birds of nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head. The people he went to and he healed and he transformed their lives when they saw what he did treated him in this way.

- [26 : 34] All the people of the region of Gerasens asked Jesus to leave them. Those who heard Jesus speak the words of life, those words of truth, what happens here in Luke chapter 4, they took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built in order to throw him off the cliff.

He's the Son of God. He's the great King of the universe. He was the Messiah, the one that everybody needs, the one who came purposefully to rescue us and to bring us right with God and from the start, from his birth, all the way through his life, there is rejection, there is lack of acceptance, there is a turning away from him.

We all know how it ended, don't we? We all know how the life of Jesus ends in his mission to this world. He didn't die of old age, he didn't die of some illness or accident, he died at the hands of wicked men who hated him and had for years plotted and schemed to kill him.

John chapter 11, they plotted to take his life and ultimately his life was taken. Ultimately, he was led out, he was given a kangaroo court trial, condemned to death, beaten and tortured and then the whole of the nation, as it were, that were gathered there at the Passover called crucify him, crucify him.

And even Pilate says, what has he done wrong? Here's your king. He was led out to a cross by Roman soldiers, he was nailed to that cross, he was executed in the most horrific, vile, painful way.

- [28 : 16] And yet, incredibly, even this too was part of the plan, the purpose, the will of God.

When the apostle Peter stands on the day of Pentecost and preaches to the Jewish people who are there and tells them this, this man, Jesus Christ, was handed over to you by God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross.

The rejection of Jesus, the determination not to have him rule over them, the hardness of hearts that he met with wherever he went, did these things ultimately scupper God's plans?

Did these actions and attitudes keep Jesus from fulfilling his work of salvation, of purchasing forgiveness and eternal life? Of course not.

Though they planned to harm, God planned to turn evil even into good. The apostle Peter, as he writes, explains about the suffering of Jesus.

- [29 : 32] He says this, for Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous to bring you to God.

He was put to death in the body but made alive in the spirit. Evil actions of human hearts cannot prevent God from saving, rescuing and delivering.

does that mean that God makes people do evil things? Certainly not. Does it mean that God wants people to do wicked things?

Certainly not. But it does mean that God is not overcome by evil but overcomes evil with good. It does mean that nothing and no one can stop him from bringing about salvation in the lives of those he saves.

you see we look at our world even today and we see it as a world which is rejecting God. A world which has turned its back on him.

- [30 : 36] A world which says we don't want you and we don't want this Christianity and we don't want this Christ and we don't want any of these things we know better we're going to live our lives our own way.

That's exactly the attitude that has been in the world since the very birth of Jesus Christ and yet for 2,000 years there's been the church and growing and people are being saved and people are being brought to faith in Jesus and this world has not been able to extinguish though it has tried many many times the church of Jesus Christ.

See in the big world in the big things of this world whether it's Brexit whether it's President Trump and in the small things of this world birth of a child God the closing of a door a full house the Lord God is graciously carrying out his plans of mercy applying the finished work of Jesus to the lives of those who need him he's still saving in a world which needs hope but has no hope there is the God of hope where we need to grow in faith and be strengthened in our faith when we are surrounded by unbelief and doubt where we see glory in a dark world it's because there is a God who is at work and who saves and so the question really again finally dear friends to us is this who is our faith in who do we believe this

God is what is our picture of him is he a God who is fickle feeble frail a God who is just blown along by this world's powers by men's desires is he a God of power and authority a God who can be trusted a God who has his finger upon the world and has a purpose for this world and perhaps in our attitude we would close the door and have closed the door to Jesus Christ and we have said no there's no room for you here no place for you in my life let me say this to you God will work as he pleases you think you're stronger than God you're not you think you can battle against him you can't there will be two eventual effects that will take place either God will leave you to your own devices and let you go your own way which will ultimately mean eternal separation and hell to be judged according to how you've lived and who you are as

God sees you and knows you fully and who's won the battle then what's your pride going to do for you then on that day of judgment when you stand before him people make all sorts of great boasts when I stand before God I'm going to give him a piece of my mind no you won't you'll shut your mouth before the almighty God as you are revealed before the universe for who you are and he is seen for who he is or else God will track you down in his loving grace and he will wear you down in his tender power so that ultimately you cannot fight against him any longer but you have to say God have your way in my life change my heart do that surgery that's so necessary to save me from eternal death God will either humble us now and save us or God will leave us may God in his mercy and grace come to us where we are even this

[34 : 35] Christmas and may he humble us to see that all the fighting and rejection of him is not worth a breath compared to his mighty power and may we receive Christ as our saviour and king and may we know that heart transformation which leads to life everlasting let's pray together before we sing our praise of him God you are so great so incredible so far and above all that we can imagine and yet we have imagined what you're like and we've got it completely wrong we ask oh lord that you would give us that light to see to see you for who you are not just the great the mighty the awesome

God but also to see that you are the saving the rescuing the merciful the loving the approachable God pray oh lord that you would give us eyes to see but more than that that lord you would give us hearts to call hearts to cry out hearts to trust hearts to believe lord have mercy upon us don't let us continue as we are in the dark don't let us continue as we are in our pride and foolishness and selfishness don't let us continue slamming the door in your face please oh lord in your mercy and grace melt us open us save us we pray lord again that when we become anxious and concerned about our world and where it's going and what's happening and those in power again help us oh lord to place all our faith and trust in you the god who holds kings and presidents in his hand the god who has a plan that he is working out to the salvation of his people and the glory of his name help us again this christmas as we rejoice in god with us to know that he's never left us we ask it in your name lord jesus amen amen amen■