

# From Heaven to a Manger

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[ 0 : 00 ] And with me again to Luke's Gospel, Luke chapter 2. And I want to read again verse 7.

Luke chapter 2, verse 7, where we read that she, Mary, gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger.

And laid him in a manger. And the manger, the manger's a constant at this time of year. You walk up the mound in Edinburgh as you go to the top, or near the top of the mound, you see the large human-sized wooden carving donated by Sir Tom Farmer.

The manger seems there, you can't miss it. It'll be there in no doubt for a few more weeks and then wherever it's placed, kept in storage and then back again next year.

Even on Thursday, one of the headlines in the tabloid read Stay away in the manger. Apparently parents in Aberdeen, a school in Aberdeen, a primary school, have been encouraged not to go to their children's nativity play because there's some bug going around in the school, some winter vomiting bug.

[ 1 : 13 ] Parents told, watch it online, stay away from the manger. So the manger, even in this modern secular age, is still a constant even in the awareness of society.

But, you know, we can so easily lose the sense of the big picture regarding Jesus' birth. If we take our eyes away from the manger.

It's interesting, if we were to have read the whole chapter here, or certainly the first half of the chapter, you would have seen that, in fact, the manger is mentioned not just once, but three times. It's mentioned once in the passage we read and other two occasions when we read of the shepherds visiting the Lord Jesus in the manger. So the manger is a constant in this passage here and for emphasis, for purpose.

Because here's the Lord Jesus, the Lord of Lords, the King of Kings, the newborn King. And He's come from heaven to earth. He's been laid in a manger.

[ 2 : 16 ] And you see, even in the passage we read, the contrast between the rulers of the world. We'll focus more on it in a moment. Contrast between, you know, the great Caesar Augustus and even his sub-ruler Quirinius.

And the contrast between these rulers of the world and Jesus, the one who humbled Himself, as we read there in Philipians 2. Jesus who came in the likeness of man.

Jesus being found in human form and laid in a manger. And, you know, even that reality of Jesus, the Lord, the Son of God, the Eternal One, laid in a manger.

Something so wonderful for us to grasp when we think of our Saviour, our Lord Jesus, there being placed in an animal's feeding trough.

And the way that we see Luke, Luke is a historian. Luke is very precise. And Luke is drawing us to see the Lord Jesus and coming to earth and, yes, in His glory, but coming to earth for us.

[ 3 : 28 ] He's humbled Himself for us. He's been obedient to the will of His Father for us. He's become like us. Sin accepted, of course. But become like us to pay the price of our salvation.

So the manger and all that happens surrounding that moment when Jesus is placed in that manger, that manger actually tells us of the greatness of the Lord Jesus.

Because we see in Jesus, there in the manger, we see His love. His love for sinners such as you and such as me. We see His servant status.

He's come to serve and to give His life as that ransom for many. He's come in full obedience to His Father for us. And therefore, for you, for me, to rejoice in our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Now, you'll have read this story many, many times. Many times. But, you know, even in the many times, there's always something new, something to grasp, something that perhaps we haven't been fully aware of when we've been considering the story of the incarnation, the coming of Jesus to

earth.

[ 4 : 40 ] And as we consider the very circumstances of Jesus' birth, then we see wonder upon wonders. We see God informing us.

of the greatness of the Lord Jesus, who was laid in the manger. So, what do we find here? Well, we've hinted at it. Let's look more closely, first of all, at the delusion of man's greatness.

Because this chapter starts with man, starts with, if you like, the power of man. We're told at the start of this chapter that there's a Roman emperor, Caesar Augustus, Augustus.

And he's so much power over all his territories. And it's very important, because this Caesar, this particular Caesar, was actually the first emperor, the Roman Empire.

Before that, it was just a Roman republic. But this man, the first emperor, that wasn't his original name. Augustus wasn't his, if you like, his real name. His real name was Gaius Octavius.

[ 5 : 41 ] But he's called Augustus, because this is meant to emphasize his greatness. He's an august ruler, a sovereign ruler. He's recognized in the empire as great.

He's the most powerful man in the world. And it's a time of peace. So, in this time of peace, he's going to use this time of peace to strengthen his empire. He's going to register everyone who's in the empire in order that they pay taxes to help strengthen this empire.

So, of course, if it's a registration, people are going to have to leave wherever they're living to go back to their hometown. That's why Mary and Joseph, we read there, that's why they leave Nazareth and go to Bethlehem.

Joseph's hometown is Bethlehem. I think even we've got this man here, Quirinius, I mean, the whole emphasis at the start of this chapter is of human power.

And it's the context of that human power that Jesus enters into the world. And surely the point's this. Here's Jesus entering the world where it seems, where it appears, that man's dominant.

[ 6 : 55 ] And you've got this man, Caesar Augustus, utterly dominant. He's ruling over the greatest empire that the world's ever seen. And it's an empire that seems to keep expanding.

It's an empire that develops so much in technology and communication and diplomacy, you name it, for a great empire. And man seems so powerful, so sovereign.

But it's an illusion. Because the true powerful one, the true eternal one, the true great one, the true glorious one, he's come to do, he's come to earth to do what no Caesar can do.

He's come to bring in a kingdom that no Caesar can bring people into. Lord Jesus has come into Caesar's world, but Jesus has come in true power, in full power.

He's come to the glorious Savior. And Caesar's world is as nothing compared to the eternal kingdom of the Lord Jesus.

[ 7 : 59 ] Jesus has come to make it possible for sinners to enter into that kingdom, that eternal kingdom, and to reign with them forever. And you know, at this time of Advent, when the birth of Jesus is remembered, it's remembered maybe more fully than at any other time of the year.

Then use this time to be reminded that man's so-called greatness, it's an illusion. It's an illusion, an illusion of power that has nothing compared with the greatness and power of Almighty God.

The many Caesars had come and exercised their rule. But only one has come in full power and full glory. Only one has come to whom all will bow the knee.

And it's the Lord Jesus. It's the one who is great. It's the Christ who was born in Bethlehem. It's the Christ who was laid in a manger. It's the Christ whom you, whom I must follow.

And it's not man's greatness that we see there in the place where Jesus was laid. But it's the greatness of the Lord Jesus. It's Jesus who holds the answers to man's deepest needs.

[ 9 : 19 ] It's not kings. It's not Caesars. It's not prime ministers. It's not politicians. It's the Lord of lords. It's the King of kings. A few days ago, of course, was election day.

The electorate voted to place people in power. And we did it. We did it out of our democratic duty. We did it under the sovereign will of God. And we do pray as we're commanded to pray for those who have that authority, that God-given authority over us.

But let's never, ever, ever regard our political leaders as we do the Lord Jesus. These powers, these earthly powers, these political rulers, they are subordinate to, they are answerable to the Lord Jesus, who alone is to be honoured and glorified and followed and worshipped.

Because it's God who sets up rulers. It's God who deposes them. And the Lord Jesus, the Christ, He's not, He's not a leader of some political party, but He's the Saviour who was born in a manger.

And so we have to see man's apparent greatness. It's an illusion. But Christ's greatness, that's a reality. And let's even now in our hearts bow before the Eternal One, the One who came, the One who came and gave His life for sinners.

[10:45] The One who revealed even there in that manger His humble status as a servant. But what about those whom God chooses?

What about God's chosen servants as we see of the inclusion of God's servants? We've seen the delusion of man's greatness. What about the inclusion of God's chosen servants?

I mean, you know, the circumstance of the time certainly would never have suggested that the One who was born in Bethlehem and laid in that manger would never have appeared.

that this is the Great One. I mean, Caesar Augustus issues that census 1,500 miles away in Rome. 1,500 miles away from where two apparently unknown, obscure individuals, Joseph the carpenter, Mary is heavily pregnant, betrothed.

They're unknown in the wider scale of things. Caesar Augustus certainly would not have known them as individuals. These two individuals who are preparing to leave Nazareth, go to Bethlehem to register in that global census.

[12:01] Two unknown people in the world's estimation. Two who are known to God and chosen by God and loved by God. One would be the mother of the Lord and the other to that caring husband of that mother, the one who would be the adopted father of the Lord Jesus.

These two individuals chosen from all eternity, chosen by the Lord of glory to bring up the Son of God in His earthly form to bring Him up in the nurture of that loving home.

Two individuals who could be worth nothing in the world's estimation. all that the world would see in these two individuals was just the few copper coins that they put in the coffers of the Roman Empire.

And yet, these two individuals who were chosen by Almighty God, these two individuals who fulfilled their part in the care and keeping of the Lord Jesus until Jesus would set forth in His public ministry thirty years later.

and surely this is a timely reminder to us all. Very few of us, if any of us, really feature in the scale of things as far as the world's concerned.

[13:21] In a few weeks' time we're going to see the latest installment of the New Year's Honours list that's published there. As you know, the New Year, the great and the good of the country are going to be given various honours.

in relation to their contribution to British society. Many are very worthy of that honour. Some of us here know at least one knight of the realm, the son of a free church minister, certainly my contemporary.

And he's well-deserved in the foreign office. He's absolutely deserved being Sir, as he's entitled to be called. But in the kingdom of God, in the kingdom that Jesus came to earth to bring in, there's only one honour.

And that honour has nothing to do with any contribution that you make to earn that honour, to earn that award. Because it's all of Christ. It's all, all of what He came to do when He came to earth. even in that first, we might call that first passive act of Christ when He was laid in the manger. That small item, I presume, made of wood in which He was placed to indicate His low status, His low status in the eyes of the world.

[14:42] 33 years later, another contraption of wood that would hold Him. That wooden cross in which He was nailed. That wooden cross in which He hung there bearing the sins of His people.

And you might not wield the power of an emperor. You might not have the status of civil honour. But if you're in Christ, if you know that electing love of God, if you know that you are His, that you are His to serve, where God has placed you to serve.

And you're blessed and blessed beyond any, any temporal, short-lived success that the world can give. You know that you are in Him.

You know that honour, knowing that honour of Christ, well, and knowing that, live by faith as Mary and Joseph live by faith, as they serve by faith their Lord, their God.

They were given particular roles to play in the work of the kingdom. Yes, they were such important, crucial roles, blessed roles.

[15:53] And notice that they accepted the role that God gave them with dignity, the dignity of faith in their service for their Lord and King. That's really what we see, I think, here also, the submission

of faith.

Because it wasn't just, you know, they're believing, if you read elsewhere in Scripture, believing what the angel had told them about the child that was to be born. Of course, in their faith and believing, we of course admire that faith.

But surely there's more to see in their faith, even in this passage. Surely we're seeing here their faith to continue to trust in God. You know, think of the journey that we're told that they were making from Nazareth to Judea.

I mean, this was no easy, short, 80 mile trip that we might do nowadays in the comfort of a car on a smooth road. No, this is a very heavily pregnant young woman travelling 80 miles on a very rough terrain in Judea.

This is a narrow road to negotiate. And they're, if you like, doing, because what they've been told to do, to submit to an emperor's ruling. But this is all under the sovereignty of God.

[17:08] That sovereignty of God that leads Mary and Joseph to the place where Jesus would be born and laid in the manger. And just think of Mary for a moment here.

Even in these days before she gives birth. Nine months before, she's been told, she's been told that she's highly favoured from God. That favour didn't mean that she's going to have a trouble-free life, a hardship-free life in the Lord's service.

And that very road itself would testify to that truth. And then, arriving in Bethlehem, no room in the inn for Mary to have some kind of comfort to give birth in.

She's going to have to lay her firstborn in the, not in a child's cot, but the animal's feeding trough.

The hardships, the suffering, the, even the rejection of the world there in Bethlehem.

Mary endures. Her husband Joseph endures. But there we're seeing, you know, an endurance by faith in her full trust in the Word of God.

[18:15] And again, there's something for you and for me to take from this. You who know God's favour. You who know God's blessing. You who know that blessing that's rescued you from the clutches of the evil one.

You who know that blessing that's delivered you from darkness into light. Mary and Joseph traversed a narrow road from Nazareth to Bethlehem.

You know a narrow road. You know a narrow road that leads to heaven. And that narrow road that's, yes, filled with trials and suffering and hardships and deprivation and the world's hostility because you follow the Lord Jesus.

But you still follow by faith as Mary and Joseph followed by faith. You still follow by faith your Lord, your Saviour. You do as He commands you to do.

You go as He sends you to. You submit as Mary and Joseph submitted even through the many trials, the hardships, the difficulties in that journey.

[19:22] They obeyed God because they trusted in His Word. That's for you, for all of us who know Him as Lord and Saviour to submit fully to His Word, to His command.

Because He is utterly trustworthy. He is utterly true. So, when we put all these circumstances together, the census, the long journey, that journey south, the fact there's no room for Mary there to give birth to, instead she's going to have to go to another place, a much more humble place, and put Jesus, her newborn, born in a manger.

Even the very town where Jesus is born, that little town of Bethlehem, that again, insignificant town in the eyes of the world, it's there that Jesus is born and placed in that manger.

And what do we see then, finally? It's better to say the humble status of the Christ child. Verse 7 again, And she gave birth her firstborn son, wrapped him in swaddling cloths, laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the end.

So let's bring all this together in relation to the humble status of Jesus. And it surely is one of the great wonders of the incarnation, that the Lord Jesus came to earth in a humble condition.

[20:41] That's why we've read verse 7 more than once. Because this is the King of Kings. This is the Eternal Son. This is the one through whom the world was created.

This is the one who's come to bear the sins of His people. Even in that telling that Luke gives us here, He's simply called a firstborn son. He's wrapped in cloth.

He's laid in a manger. And I would certainly hazard, hazard a guess, that no other child in Bethlehem that evening would have been in similar circumstances. It's little wonder that our catechism tells us that Christ's humiliation consisted in His being born and that in a low condition.

Being born and that in a low condition. The eternal Son of God. The one who existed from all eternity. God, very God, uncreated.

God, the Son, was born. Born of Mary. Born under the law. Born of Mary. Fully human. Full human nature with all its sinless weaknesses.

[ 21 : 50 ] Human weaknesses. Jesus with hunger. Jesus with thirst. He'd be tired. He'd be sorrowful. And born in that low condition. And again, that's what we like we read there in Philippians 2 of Paul telling us of Jesus making Himself nothing.

That humble state is that low condition. And that's emphasized in His birth. Born in that place where animals would have been kept.

placed in an animal's feeding trunk. Because there's no compassion from anyone there in Bethlehem for Mary to give birth. Even in a reasonably normal place to give birth to there.

As we said, born in Bethlehem. No political significance of Bethlehem at that time. But it's a time where the Savior of the world was born. The servant king, the one who made Himself nothing.

The one who is born for the sake of His people for your salvation. And all these circumstances add them all up and we see the amazing humbling the self-humbling of Jesus.

[ 22 : 59 ] That humble status. That self-humbling of our Lord that's really what we're seeing here in this passage. Jesus laid in the very first resting place that He's laid in.

A manger. This is the Lord Jesus who was rich yet for our sakes was made poor so that you might become rich, rich in salvation.

This is the Lord Jesus who was willing to suffer. Suffering for you, for me. Suffering from Bethlehem through to Calvary.

In His life of suffering, in His life of rejection, in His life of facing even the intense temptations of the devil. Suffering in His soul even before the cross.

And in suffering on the cross where He bore us the sins of His people. Jesus being made poor so that you might become rich. Jesus being poor even emphasized and being laid in the manger.

[ 24 : 09 ] I mentioned the manger as an animal's feeding trough but sure there's much more to see in that. Surely it's a symbol. A symbol of the humble status of Jesus.

Surely that manger itself is a sign of His suffering. That suffering that began at Bethlehem and we might say descended to Calvary. When you think of that journey of Jesus that began humanly speaking began at Bethlehem then remember His suffering.

For Your Sake. That journey that began at Bethlehem in a manger. And think even of His early years we'll be thinking more of this evening. The flight to Egypt age two to escape from the murderous Herod the Great.

Think of His ministry years in Samaria and Galilee and Judea. That journey to Calvary begins with a no vacancy sign in Bethlehem.

That journey that sees Jesus placed in that rough shod manger that ends with a spitting and scoffing in that rough hewn cross in Jerusalem.

[ 25 : 22 ] And it's all part of God's perfect plan. And it was and it is God's will that Jesus was rich yet for your sake became poor for your sake.

Jesus placed in the manger for your sake. For your sake he became poor because God rules all things. Even the full up signs there in Bethlehem.

Even the manger for a bed. All part of God's perfect plan. All part of the suffering of Jesus there on that road that began at Bethlehem and descended to Calvary.

And at this time of year when there's so much frivolity so much emptiness so much overindulgence and self indulgence will you remember that the Christ the Son of God was laid in a manger and he's the same Christ who was put on the cross.

The manger leads to the cross. The humbling the self humbling of the Christ child there in that animal feeding was a humbling that ended on that cross in Calvary.

[ 26 : 41 ] He was all part of God's perfect plan for your salvation. He had to be laid in that manger. He had to die on that cross. He had to become nothing in order to give you everything.

He denied himself so that you might be denied nothing of his grace and his eternal love. How do you respond to the Lord Jesus?

How do you respond to the Christ child in the manger? Surely it's to see Christ's greatness there in the manger. To see the true greatness of the Son of God who humbled himself and has been willing to become nothing so that he might give you everything for your sake, for your eternal welfare.

manger. That manger then points to the greatness of Jesus. And when it points to the greatness of Jesus, then surely it gives you that true security.

It gives you that eternal comfort to know that he who made himself poor so that you might be rich, that means that he can't give you anything less than the fullness of his grace and the fullness of his love now and forever.

[ 28 : 00 ] In 1943 when the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer was imprisoned in Tegel, in Tegel, Berlin, he was very active of course in his opposition to the godless Nazi regime.

In that prison he wrote many letters including a number of letters to his fiancée. And in one of these letters he wrote this, God is in the manger.

wealth in poverty, light in darkness, succour in abandonment, no evil can befall us whatever man may do to us.

That's the comfort that we have when we by faith see Christ in the manger, when we see the one who left the glory of heaven and came to earth to save and to give and to give his life and to die.

He is your hope, he's your shield, all in all. He entered the world in the poverty of humanity.

[ 29 : 01 ] He entered that world in that humbling of himself that so clearly seen in the manger there in Bethlehem. As he entered the world, as he's seen and has been laid in the manger, you might say his soul departed the world in the humility of the cross.

Jesus rose again and he's now in the glory of heaven and he's awaiting that time when he'll return and he's coming again and he's not coming as a baby.

He's not coming to be laid in a manger. He's coming in all his glory and triumph when every knee will bow and acknowledge him as Lord, as God.

And so it's for you then to believe now, to trust now and to put your life in his hands, to show your devotion to him by living for him, to live humbly, to serve, to deny yourself and to follow Jesus on that road to Calvary.

Yes, yes, let's see God the Son in the manger and remember that he left that manger on that road of suffering for your sake.

[ 30 : 18 ] And so let's see beyond the tinsel and the trappings of this time of year that in many ways is devoid of Christ. Let's put Christ back into Christmas. I know it's a cliché but you know it is a reality.

And let's do it in a way that glorifies our Saviour. Yes, see God in the manger for your sake. And know, to pour again these words from Tegel Jail, know that no evil can befall you whatever man may do to you because Jesus came.

Because Jesus came to deliver you from evil and to bring you into his eternal kingdom safe, secure, eternally in him.

Amen. Let us pray. Our Lord, our God, our Heavenly Father, again we give you praise and thanks for your greatness, for your goodness to us in sending the Lord Jesus for us.

and so Lord, as we have been considering these truths, these truths of the Lord Jesus in the manger, help us Lord, we pray to follow him, to serve him, to live humbly in that service in order to give him the glory and to deny self.

[ 31 : 29 ] So hear us Lord as we continue in praise before you. Forgive us, we pray again our sins, our sins even in holy things. And we pray these things in Jesus' name.

Amen. Well let's close in Psalm 24 on page 28 of our Psalm books, sing Psalms, and we're going to sing verse 7 down to verse 10.

You ancient gates, lift up your heads, your doors be opened wide, so that the King of glory come forever to abide. Who is this exalted King?

What glorious King is he? It is the Lord of strength and might, the Lord of victory. 7 to 10, to God's praise, the Tune of St. George's, Edinburgh.

the eres from God to God's God's Hmph.

[ 32 : 35 ] Ileva him a thousand games.