

Isaiah 35:1-10

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[0:00] Friends, you can be seated. Well, I hope you're having a good time so far. You know, at these services we get a lot of visitors.

and I'm always thinking, oh man, I hope I don't say anything too weird. and make the visitors, make the guests feel awkward.

Because the Roberts family, that's my family, sometimes we can do that. I remember a few years ago we had some friends over for dinner, and not religious people, but in my family we always say grace before dinner.

And I thought, you know, I don't want to make the guests feel uncomfortable, and us appear super religious, you know, and odd or something. So I came up with the brilliant idea of asking one of my children to say grace.

And I thought it would be cutesy. Maybe I'm thinking they'll say something like, dear God, thank you for the food. Amen. And you know, that's not offensive. That's not too weird.

[1:03] Anyway, I said, friends, we usually say grace. It's okay, if we say grace, let's say grace. And I pointed to one of my kids, I said, would you just say grace for us? And with all eyes closed and every head bowed at a table, my daughter launched into the following prayer.

In the name of the one and only risen Lord Jesus Christ, rose from the dead.

Anyway, so it went well. It went well. That was good. Okay, let's get into this sermon. I want to talk a bit about the passage we just read, Luke 2, 1 to 7, which tells us about the birth of Jesus, the Son of God.

And I want to answer this question. Why did God come to us like this as a baby? Why did God come to us like this as a baby?

Now, before I get to that question, let's talk a bit about big picture stuff, okay? I want to give you sort of a big picture of the story here, Luke 2, 1 to 7. So here we go. It's interesting to me that in this little section, these seven verses, it doesn't go straight into Jesus being born.

[2:19] There's a little bit of like historical preamble. First, it tells us about the ruler of the empire, Caesar Augustus, who wants to know exactly how many people he rules over, probably for tax purposes.

He wants to make sure everyone gets taxed. So he sends everyone back to their place of birth for a census. And he could do things like this, Caesar, because he was Caesar. He was the emperor. And he had real power.

In fact, the senate of the day declared him to be a living God. So when he says, I want to do this, I mean, the people do it. So around 0 AD, the whole empire is on the move. People are returning to their towns to be counted.

And that's the preamble. That's interesting, isn't it? Why do they include that? When we get to verse 4, that's when we first hear about Joseph and Mary, and they're on their 100-kilometer journey to Bethlehem.

And it would have been a really difficult journey, because Mary's a teenager, and she's like nine months pregnant. And when they get to Bethlehem, there's nowhere for them to stay. So she has to give birth in a stable, which is a place where animals are kept.

[3:20] There's no extended family around. There's no midwife. They're all alone. The newborn is wrapped in cloth and laid in a feeding trough, which is what a manger is. So that's the story. Now, without any other information, what have we got so far?

We've got a very powerful man orders the entire empire to do his bidding, because he can. And one of those people is this poor, unmarried, very pregnant teenager who is forced to make this huge journey and then give birth in a barn.

And stated like that, it kind of sucks all the sentimentality out of the situation, doesn't it? All of a sudden, those Christmas cards with the manger scene on the front don't look sort of so as romantic, you know?

But I think it's good that the sentimentality gets sucked out of it, because it's a really awful situation. Now, I want to remind you that this story was written a very long time ago, but it is sophisticated literature.

And in these few verses, Luke is trying to present us with a great contrast and a great irony. A great contrast and a great irony.

[4 : 27] The contrast is between power and weakness, between political muscle and humility. That's the contrast. And the great irony here, the huge irony here, is you have this man with astonishing arrogance who believes he's a God, and you have a baby in astonishing humility who actually is God.

You have this man who thinks he's God, and you have a baby who is. Okay, that's the big picture stuff. Now I want to get back to our original question, the big why question. Why did God come to us like this as a baby?

And I want to break that question in half. The first being, why did God come to be with us at all?

Like, I think that's a great question. Why bother at all?

And the second part of it is, why come to us like this? As just a vulnerable child in a really vulnerable situation, why not enter the world with a bit of gravitas?

Born in a castle. Born in a temple. Or just appear as a grown-up, muscly and well-dressed or something.

[5 : 39] Like, I don't know, I'm making stuff up now, but God sent his son to be born in a barn and laid in a feeding trough. I mean, that was on no one's bingo card, was it? So let's deal with this first question first.

Why did God come to us at all? Why make the effort? Because, you know, it was a drama. Let me tell you about Dorothy Sayers. I've told this story before, but it's one of my favorite stories to get across to explain the why question about why God came to be with us.

So Dorothy Sayers was a sort of contemporary of C.S. Lewis. They were actually friends with C.S. Lewis. She was. She lived early, mid-1900s. She was a Christian. She was an amateur theologian. She was a writer.

She was one of the first women to graduate from Oxford. And she describes herself, and this will be important later, she describes herself as being not a particularly attractive woman.

She's most famous as a writer of crime novels. She wrote a long series about a guy called Lord Peter Wimsey, who was a detective who solved crimes.

[6 : 43] About halfway through the series, it was a series of books, about halfway through the series, she introduced a new fictional character, a new character in the book called Harriet Vane.

And in the story, in the story, Harriet is one of the first female graduates of Oxford. Not particularly attractive, she's described as in the book.

And this fictional character happens to write crime novels. What are the chances, right? What are the chances, right? And in the books, Harriet Vane meets Lord Peter Wimsey, and they fall in love. And they get married, and they solve crimes. Like, it's brilliant. Now, here's what many people think. They think Dorothy Sayers looked into the world that she created in her books.

She looked at the man she created, Lord Peter Wimsey, who was a lonely man, and she, the author, fell in love with him. And so, what did she do?

[7 : 44] She wrote herself into the story. She wrote herself into the story. Now, some of you will think, oh, that's quite beautiful. It's quite lovely.

But this is the story of Christmas. This is the claim of Christmas. This is what we are singing about. God looked at the world he created. He looked at the people he made.

And he loved us. And he saw we were in a bit of a mess. So, what does he do? He writes himself into the story. Right into the womb of a peasant girl.

And that's why God came to us. Because he loved us. And so, we could know him. And so, he could deal with the mess.

So, that's the answer to the first question. God came to us because, you know what the great thing about this is? Is we don't have to guess what God is like. When you ask yourself, what's God like?

[8 : 49] It doesn't fall into the realm of opinion. As we have Jesus. God came so we could know him. Okay, second question. Second question. You may be able to wrap your head around that.

You know, God wants to be known. We want to know God. He meets us in time and space, physically come to us. But why a baby? I mean, it's just so wild, isn't it?

In a smelly stable. Teenage mum. Wasn't married. Backwater town. I want to make a couple of points here.

What's going on? I think God is trying to tell us something. Through the nature of his birth. God is telling us. Well, first of all, God doesn't demand that we come up to him, does he?

God doesn't demand that we climb some ladder to reach some particular standard of holiness to meet him. He says, no, I'm going to come down, down, down, down, down.

[9 : 52] I'm going to come down to your level. That's how much I want to know you, he says. You know, in our next reading later in the service, there's a choir of angels. And they sing glory to God in the highest.

The angels praise God. And you'd think the angels would be fairly impressed with God already. But here, they praise God after the birth of Jesus because their minds are blind.

Because they're amazed at the lengths that God would go to be known. That's why they praise him. So God comes in an incredibly humble way. And that tells us how much he loves us.

We can't get to him. He comes down to be with us. Willing to become a child to do that. Born normally, typically into this world.

Now you might say, yes. Okay, I can wrap my head around that. But why not a nice middle class birth? Wouldn't that have worked?

[10 : 56] Done the job? Like a home birth? Bath? Towels? You know, somebody's boiling water? Walls?

Do you know what I mean? Like walls? The other thing I'll say about the birth is this. There was just humility and weakness and rejection all tied up in this story.

And the humility of the manger is a foreshadowing of something that's going to come 33 years later, which is the crucifixion. So the perceived kind of weakness and vulnerability of the manger is a foreshadowing of the cross.

Here's what I mean. So the manger is seen as a picture of meekness and rejection. God comes to us. And what happens? We don't make room. I'm sorry, there's no room for you. Heavily pregnant teenage mother.

There's no room. We don't make room. You'll have to give birth in a smelly stable. And Christ's whole life is marked with this kind of thing. This self-giving of God and receiving rejection.

[12 : 00] So this beginning is signaling to us what his experience of life will be like. And if you read the rest of the story, Jesus as an adult, like his family, his literal family goes through a period of thinking he's really mentally unwell.

The religious elite want to kill him. His friends turn on him. And this all culminates in the ultimate picture of rejection, which is the cross. So I think that's why the birth looked like that.

It's foreshadowing that. The poverty of his birth is trying to tell us something about how God will save us.

Now, let me finish up here. I don't know what you think about everything I've just said. For those of you who don't give much thought to such things, can I just challenge you with a question?

Is it possible that there's more to Jesus than you think? I mean, the Bible story here would suggest that. I think it's common for people to like Jesus but not do much about that.

[13 : 06] Perhaps we regard him as a prophet, a really good guy, like a super spiritual person, a special person. But is it possible there's more going on that maybe we should do something about?

It was my birthday a few months ago. And on our birthday, my family, what we do is we go around the table and everyone has to say something nice about the birthday person.

And it was my birthday, so we started off going around the table saying something nice about Daddy. And my first kid said, Dad, you don't smell. Which I thought that was pretty good.

Like I took that. That's a great compliment, I think. Dad, you don't smell. And then my next kid, my next kid said, Dad, you're kind of like a father figure to us.

I'm going to repeat it to you. I'm going to repeat. That's verbatim. Dad, you're kind of like a father figure to us.

[14:12] And honestly, for half a second, I thought, that's so lovely. And then I thought, what? A father figure. And I looked at her.

I'm not going to say who it is. I looked at her and I said, I'm your actual father. I was there at your literal birth. I'm married to your mother.

We live in the same house. And the more I thought about it, the worse it got. Because she didn't say, I'm a father figure. She said, I'm kind of like a father figure.

I'm in the ballpark of somebody who resembles a father figure. On my birthday. All right? Now, I think she was joking.

But, like, here's my point. Here's my point. In an effort to be sort of respectful and stuff at times, I think sometimes we can get the wrong end of the stick with someone, you know. So, we can say Jesus is a special person.

[15:18] He's a Messiah figure. He's a God-like figure. And that's it. But honestly, folks, that's Timu Jesus. Right? That is Timu Jesus.

That is budget Jesus. The gospel stories do not let us think that. They say, this baby is God who has come to be with us.

He's not a God-like figure. Not a Messiah-like person. It's legit God. Now, the objection to that is, you know, the objection to this is like, I know you open the Bible and it says this stuff.

But, I mean, can we just trust the authors on that? Do we just trust them? And just to finish here in just 60 seconds, can I just point out one thing to you?

Luke, who wrote this particular gospel, he was a medical doctor. And when you read it, it doesn't sound like fiction when you read it. It doesn't sound like myth, like Greek or Roman mythology.

[16:23] It doesn't read like a fable. It doesn't read like chicken soup for the soul. It doesn't start by saying once upon a time. Remember, it begins with, hey, remember that time that Caesar had a census.

And then in verse 2, just randomly it says where Quirinius was the governor of Syria. Like it's naming these historical figures.

It's written by an historian because it's history. These things really happened. The Son of God was born in a stable.

Now, if this idea intrigues you, you know, part of my job is to help people think about this stuff. And if this job, if this sort of intrigues you, what we've been talking about, one of my mates on staff, Chris Lay, he runs these discussion groups called Come and See.

They're just for people who just want to ask some questions and have a bit of a dialogue about this stuff because they're, you know, they're genuinely curious. So that runs on three consecutive Wednesdays starting in January.

[17:26] Just a space to ask all the questions you want. Reach out to me. I'll point you in the right direction or go to the website. Now, just to finish off, I just want to pray for us very, very quickly. And then we'll get on with some carols.

So let me pray for us. Heavenly Father, thank you that you became one of us. To save us. Forgive me. Forgive us when we don't make room for you.

And help me to follow you. Amen.