

The Priceless Gift of Christmas

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[0:00] We've taken your Bibles and opened them this morning to Luke chapter 2.

! I'm going to read verses 1 through 20 here in just a moment. Luke chapter 2 verses 1 through 20 is our text. I heard a story about a couple of men who were neighbors and good friends and just a few days before Christmas they decided to go sailing while their wives went Christmas shopping. Sounded like a pretty good idea. And yet while the men were out there in their sailboat a thunderstorm just kind of came out of nowhere and the sea became very choppy and difficult to manage the boat.

In fact, try as they may, they could not get the boat to land. And as they were trying to maneuver their ship, their boat, toward land they came upon a sandbar.

And so the boat was grounded right out there in the middle of the sea. And so they immediately jumped out of the boat and tried as hard as they could with all of their strength to push and shove that heavy boat into deeper water so that they could make their way to land.

[1:21] And one of them, while they were kind of knee-deep in mud, looked at his friend and he said, Hey, buddy, it beats Christmas shopping, doesn't it?

I seem compelled, you know, over the last several Sundays to always introduce my sermons by alluding to gift shopping and Christmas shopping.

And I think you have gathered that maybe I don't particularly like doing it. And you probably would be right. And I think if we were to take a poll here this morning, most of the men would agree with that. And yet the shopping is kind of a necessary thing, isn't it, this time of the year.

And maybe many of you are finished with it. For some of you, the gift-buying part of the season is in full swing. And we have a little better than a week remaining, of course, until Christmas Day when many of those gifts that were bought will be opened, unwrapped, and hopefully appreciated.

Hopefully they will be received and enjoyed. And if not, there, of course, is always the many happy returns after Christmas. Now, there is, of course, somewhat of a debate about this tradition.

[2:44] Gift-giving. Christmas gift-giving. And you might have done a little research on that. I have over the years. And we would rather think that it is decidedly Christian and, sadly, it is likely not in its origin.

But what matters to me, in my judgment, is what it has become to the Christian community over the centuries. And, clearly, gift-giving at Christmastime is symbolic of the greatest gift that was given to us.

So let's just hold to that tradition, okay? Regardless of the origin of the, quote, Christmas gift-giving, it clearly is symbolic of God's greatest gift to us.

And John 3.16, I think, makes that pretty clear, identifying the gift. For God so loved the world that He, what? Gave. Gave His only begotten Son.

And, of course, those of us here today who have received that gift gladly, graciously, we would agree with Paul in 2 Corinthians 9.15 when he declared, thanks be to God for His indescribable gift.

[4:09] And so, maybe we could come to this conclusion, and I think a good conclusion, a right conclusion, that all of our gift-giving this season is really in direct response or should be in response to His gift to us.

And so, our gift-giving ought to be a thankful response to the greatest gift that we have ever received and anyone could ever receive God's indescribable gift.

The priceless gift, I would call it. Certainly so. The priceless gift of Christmas. All right, so let's read the text. Luke 2, verses 1-20.

And when we read this, we are all on familiar ground. Perhaps the most well-known portion of Scripture in the book of Luke, certainly, and maybe in the entire New Testament.

And here is how Luke wrote it. And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered.

[5:22] This census first took place while Quirinius was governing Syria. So all went to be registered, every one to his own city. Joseph also went up from Galilee out of the city of Nazareth into Judea to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem because he was of the house and lineage of David to be registered with Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with child.

So it was that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn.

Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields keeping watch over their flock by night. And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them and the glory of the Lord shone round about them.

And they were greatly afraid. Then the angel said to them, Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

And this will be the sign to you. You will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly hosts praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, good will toward men.

[6:55] So it was when the angels had gone away from them into the heaven that the shepherds said to one another, Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us.

And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the babe lying in a manger. Now when they had seen Him, they made widely known the saying which was told them concerning this child. And all those who heard it marveled at those things which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart.

Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen as it was told them. Alright, there is the story.

The Christmas story. Very familiar story. Now let's just imagine. I kind of introduced this sermon on the subject or with the subject of gift giving. Let's just imagine that chapter 2 of Luke's Gospel is God giving us a priceless gift.

[8:03] And we don't have to imagine that, do we? Because that's the case. That's exactly what we have here in Luke chapter 2. Essentially, Luke chapter 2 is God's Christmas gift or present to you all wrapped up for you and placed under the tree.

Alright? If you could imagine that. And the wrapping of this gift, this priceless gift, consists of all the various events that took place that surrounded the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And these various events in the story as recorded by Luke are not incidental. I want you to know that. They're not just incidental. Not just filler. Not just things added to make the story interesting or appealing.

They're not incidental, these events surrounding the birth of Christ. They're significant. Highly significant. And they are intended to cause us to appreciate the gift, of course, but also the gift giver.

And, you know, sometimes we will take special love and care in wrapping a present for that special one.

[9:15] Maybe we'll buy some expensive wrapping paper. And maybe we'll find some fancy ribbon and bows. And, you know, what we're doing is hopefully the wrapping reveals something about the gift itself.

Its great worth. And also about the gift giver as well. The great worth of the gift giver as well. And I think that the wrapping, of course, creates excitement.

And it creates an anticipation toward the gift inside. Now, that's what we have here in Luke chapter 2. Really. The gift of the Savior is, of course, Jesus.

Jesus. The Lord Jesus Christ. And it's presented to us in very special wrapping here in Luke chapter 2. And the wrapping, again, reveals the worth of the gift, but also of the gift giver.

So that's what I want us to do this morning. Let's unwrap this gift this morning in Luke chapter 2. And here's how I want to do it. I don't want to just kind of tear into the Christmas present like I did when I was a kid.

[10:31] And maybe some of your kids do. You know, on Christmas morning or whenever you open your presents and you give out the gifts to the little ones and the first thing you do is just absolutely mangle and rip the paper off as quick as they can.

They don't care anything about the wrapping. They only care about the gift itself. And I don't want to do that with this gift, this present, neatly wrapped and beautifully wrapped for us.

I want to do that and open it very slowly, very methodically and taking special care with each element of the wrapping itself.

Now, of course, the wrapping of God's priceless gift, the Lord Jesus Christ, does not consist of paper and bows, does it?

Not in a literal sense. The wrapping is the story. It's the story. The way Luke wrote it. The way the Holy Spirit inspired Luke to write it.

[11:30] It consists of the particular elements Luke included in the story. And again, I would add and qualify that the elements, the particular elements that God inspired him to include in the story.

And so to get at the gift, we need to unwrap the story. And so this morning, I want to highlight five parts of this story. Now, we could highlight many, many others because every movement of the story is significant and meaningful to us and profound.

But I want to highlight five of them this morning. And then as we look at the text, and these five kind of stand out, as we read them, and as I read them, and as I studied this very familiar text, one that I've preached on many, many times, as I read it and studied it and reacted to each of these five, a single word for each of them stands out to me.

All right? So that's kind of our approach this morning. Now, here's the first one. Listen to it very carefully. And think of a word, a word to describe it.

All right? Verse 1. A decree. Now, listen to this. Take it all in. A decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered.

[13:03] And here's the word that comes to my mind. Audacious. Did you think that when you read this? Or something similar? How bold?

How audacious? I mean, listen to me. What an audacious decree to be issued by a king, a mere king of the world.

A decree that the entire inhabited world, that's literally what Luke is writing. In fact, some translations bring that out. A decree that the entire inhabited world would be counted.

Registered. For purposes of taxation, I think that's pretty clear. Audacious. Literally, that an official census be taken of the entire inhabited world.

How bold is that? Audacious. And I ask myself, could any king make such an edict, a decree, and expect it to be obeyed?

[14:16] Expect it to be carried out? Well, Caesar Augustus did. Did he have reason to expect it to be carried out? Well, he certainly did. And in fact, according to Luke, the citizens of the known world obeyed the decree, didn't they?

In fact, you look at verse 3 and what does it say? So, all, how many? All, all went to be registered. That's exactly what the decree demanded.

All went to be registered, everyone to his own city. You see, and you know this, the civilized world at the time of Jesus' birth and really throughout his life was ruled by the mighty Roman Empire.

Rome ruled it all. And on the throne of that day, the throne of the empire, was a man by the name of Gaius Octavianus.

I'll get it out here in a minute. Gaius Octavianus. All right, if you want to be critical, you stand here next Sunday morning. Gaius Octavianus.

[15:25] And that was his given name. You say, I don't see that anywhere here in Luke's Gospel. Well, you don't find the name there because Luke just gives us the man's title. When he says Caesar Augustus, that was simply his title.

That was not his name. Gaius Octavianus was his name. Caesar just simply means emperor. And Augustus, which is an interesting part of the title, means venerable or revered.

In fact, it was a title that was generally used to describe a god than indeed to most people he was. And let's just consider just a little history about Octavian.

We'll shorten it to Octavian. That's what he's primarily known by, from historians. Let's just consider his rise to power. Octavian. Gaius Octavian.

At the age of 20, Octavian was adopted by his famous great uncle, and you'll recognize this name, Julius Caesar, who then declared that Octavian would be heir to the throne one day.

[16 : 34] And one year later, Julius Caesar was assassinated, murdered, which gave Octavian rights to the throne then, but he did not rule right away because the Roman Empire was not really very unified in these days.

There were many factions, many civil wars, and so Octavian did not rule right away. Initially, Rome was ruled by a triumvirate was the technical name, meaning that the power was shared by three people in the empire.

There was Marcus Lepidus, there was Mark Antony, if you're familiar with that name, and Gaius Octavian. Now, eventually, Lepidus fell from his seat of authority.

We won't go into the story about how that happened, but that left Octavian and Mark Antony as the sole rulers of the Roman Empire. Mark Antony fell out of favor with Octavian when he left his wife, who happened to be Octavian's sister.

That kind of bent him out of shape. And he left his wife to have his famous affair, love affair, with Cleopatra. And you're familiar with that name, the infamous queen of Egypt.

[17 : 52] Now, at that point, Mark Antony became more focused toward Egypt and the affairs of Egypt than he was concerned for the welfare of Rome, which irritated Octavian even more.

And that led ultimately to a war. In fact, it was a sea battle between two navies, the Roman navy and the Egyptian navy.

and they did battle, the battle of Actium, where the vastly superior Roman navy absolutely defeated the Egyptian navy, after which Mark Antony and Cleopatra both committed suicide, and then Octavian became the sole ruler of the Roman Empire.

That's how it all came about. And later, very soon after, the Roman Senate conferred on Octavian the title Caesar Augustus.

Emperor, translated Emperor the Supreme One, or Emperor the Majestic One. Again, a title usually reserved for a god.

[18 : 59] And indeed, he was worshipped as a god by everyone who respected him, by everyone who valued their lives. But now, there's no denying his greatness.

He was a great military leader. He was a great political leader, certainly. Very great, very much a political leader. He was a great social and civic leader.

And Caesar Augustus brought about the end of all the various civil wars in the kingdom of Rome.

And previously, again, there was very little unification in the empire.

And Gaius Octavianus, or Caesar Augustus, was able to bring unity to the empire. In fact, many would call Caesar Augustus the very first Caesar emperor of the Roman empire.

And he was very, very accomplished, very well able to lead. And he literally ruled the entire known world, expanding the borders of the Roman empire to the known world of the day.

[20 : 11] And under his leadership, he established what was called the Pax Romana, the Roman peace that unified the entire world, that basically removed all borders between territories and countries and regions of the empire.

He built also the extensive Roman roads, the Roman highways, which provided of course easy access for his military to be transported to the various parts of his empire.

But also these Roman roads allowed transportation for commerce and for the spread of education and civilization and the spread of Roman culture and so forth.

But, having said all of that and all that he accomplished, he also accomplished something he did not intend.

And that was the spread of the gospel to the known world of the day. That's what Caesar Augustus did. Now he didn't intend it. He didn't even know it.

[21 : 26] The Roman roads, of course, provided rapid and easy access to take the gospel to all parts of the civilized world. The Pax Romana, the Roman peace, pretty much did away with all borders so that the gospel could spread from region to region, country to country, with very little hindrance.

There were virtually no borders in that day, in the early days of the gospel and on into the early days of the church. Rome ruled it all. And I guess you would say it was perfect timing, wasn't it? On God's part. Not that God just saw that it was a good time. God brought all this about. In fact, the Bible describes it this way in Galatians 4.4, but when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth

His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law. In the fullness of time. When the time was just right, and God brought all these things to the place where it was the perfect timing. And He did it through the Roman Empire. I tell you, it is literally inestimable what Caesar Augustus did unknowingly for to accomplish the coming of Jesus and the ultimate spread of the gospel to all points of the world. [22 : 48] And here in Luke chapter 2, we have a profound proof of that. God raised up an empire. Oh, yes, He did. God did that.

God raised up an empire, a great empire, probably the greatest empire that has existed since, well, since our country, our civilization. Maybe even a sense greater than that in the sense of its scope and its rule of the known world.

And God raised up this empire and God raised up a ruler, Caesar Augustus, and gave him authority over all the world.

Some would say he took that authority. No, he was given that authority. God gave him that authority over the entire world. And so God moved Caesar Augustus to move the entire population of the world in order to move Mary and Joseph from Nazareth to Bethlehem where the prophets had already foretold the Messiah would be born.

Do you see? God announces what he's going to do before he does it and no one and no thing can stop him. He brings it about.

[24 : 06] There is a place, I'm told, called Halicarnassus, a Greek town located probably today in modern Turkey. And in that town, according to the writings of Herodotus, a famous Greek writer, there was an inscription on a stone that read, Caesar Augustus, Savior of the world.

Interesting. But while Caesar Augustus was enjoying the lavish comforts of his palatial houses and marbled halls, the true Savior of the world was being born in a stable.

And while Caesar Augustus was enjoying the praise and worship and adoration of his vast empire, the true Savior of the world was born in obscurity, in poverty, without honor, and without notice, save only by a few.

And even those few were insignificant people. And yet, this perfectly fit in God's sovereign plan. Because Caesar Augustus issued an audacious decree that caused Joseph and Mary to go to Bethlehem and have their baby and fulfill prophecy.

Audacious. Now, we're unwrapping the priceless gift of Christmas and doing so by considering five profound points in Luke's narrative.

[25 : 40] We have four more to go. The next two really go together. And I think you'll see that as we move through them. second, and listen carefully to this, verse 5.

A very profound statement. Very poignant. Verse 5, Mary, his betrothed wife, do you see it there? This phrase, just a short little phrase, not even the entire sentence. Mary, his betrothed wife, now get this next phrase, who was with child.

That's very profound. Very poignant. And here's the word that comes to my mind. Scandalous. Think about that. Scandalous. Now, Luke refers to Mary as the wife of Joseph. But, he qualifies that with the word betrothed.

[26 : 46] Now, that's important. Betrothed wife, or you might have in your translation, engaged wife. His engaged wife.

That is, they were not married, not in the fullest sense, not yet. They were under a legal engagement, but not legally married with full rights, in the truest sense, which meant that the marriage had not yet been consummated, and really morally and legally should not be consummated until at least one year after the engagement.

Now, even though they were still considered husband and wife in the legal sense, they could not live together, nor could they have sexual relationship at all.

They couldn't consummate this. Yet, the engagement was binding, very binding, legally. to end the engagement, a legal divorce would be required.

If Joseph had died during the engagement time, Mary would have been considered a widow. That's how binding this was. If either of them had sexual relations with someone else, it would have been considered adultery.

[28 : 03] Hence, why Joseph was very concerned when he was told that his wife was pregnant, he thought maybe, you know, just have kind of a quiet little divorce.

It was considered adultery. But here's the point, and let's not lose the point in all of the legalese about the engagement period.

Here's the point. Luke states this so poignantly. He says, Mary, Joseph's betrothed wife, who was with child.

And he added that because this was a scandalous thing. The scandal of that. It was a scandalous thing for a woman to be pregnant during the engagement, which, by the way, I think might explain why Joseph brought Mary along with him on this journey to Bethlehem.

It was God ordained, but in his mind, it might be the best way to get her away from those who would be very critical of her. It might even persecute her openly. Now, of course, having said that, we know the truth about Mary's pregnancy, don't we?

[29:19] Don't we? We know the truth about it. She did not sin with Joseph or any other man, as some have rumored that she did. She was still a virgin at this point, even though nobody knew it.

She was carrying the Messiah, who of course, was supernaturally conceived in her womb by the Holy Spirit. We know that, don't we? And more importantly, Mary and Joseph knew the truth about it.

Didn't they? Well, they did. They should have. The angel Gabriel had told them both about this, and so they knew the truth of that. But let me ask you something.

Knowing the truth about that child in Mary's womb, did that take away the reproach? No. Did that silence the cruel gossip that was most assuredly going on?

No, it didn't stop that. Did knowing the truth about Mary's pregnancy, did that stop any measure of persecution that she received from her own people, possibly even her own family?

[30:39] No to all three questions. And so the question is, why did God put them through that? Why did He?

God could have waited. I say this very respectfully. But could God have not waited until they were legally married, fully married, before Jesus was conceived in her womb?

He could have. Of course. He could have. So why didn't He? Well, before we try to answer that, let me include the third profound statement in Luke's narrative.

Again, part of the wrapping of God's priceless gift. Third, verse seven. They laid Him in a manger, a feeding trough.

Why? Because there was no room for them in the end. That's what Luke tells us. I say that's very profound. And here's the word that comes to my mind. Curious.

[31:51] Curious. Now put these two together. Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with child.

Scandalous. And they laid Him, that is Jesus, that is the Son of God, the Messiah, they laid Him in a feeding trough because there was no room for them in the inn.

Curious. Curious. I mean, this is a pretty rough set of circumstances for Mary and Joseph and for the Messiah, the Lord's Messiah.

Now, let me remind you a moment ago, we saw how God literally moved the entire population of the world to make sure that His Holy Son would be born in Bethlehem just like He had prophesied.

We saw that. And now when they get to Bethlehem, they don't even have or there's not even a motel room available. Is that not curious to you? Could God have made sure that the mother of the Messiah had adequate lodging when they arrived at Bethlehem?

Absolutely He could have. Sure. Could God have conceived His Son in Mary's womb immediately after she was legally married to Joseph?

[33:12] Of course. He could have. But the question, listen, is not what God can do. It's what God purposes to do.

That's the question. What God wills to do. And God's will was that His eternal Son enter the world in obscurity and poverty and hardship.

That was His will. 2 Corinthians 7:13. For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ that though He was rich, dear people, He was rich beyond comprehension, beyond imagination.

Though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, for your sakes He became poor that you through His poverty might be rich.

Now did you hear that? For your sake He became poor. You see, here's what we ought to get from this. And there's really more that's implied here, but this is very specific, I think.

[34:38] Bethlehem is the beginning of Calvary's road for Jesus. That's the beginning of it. It didn't begin just hours before His crucifixion. Calvary's road began day one.

In fact, really even before day one. Even before the very birth of Christ. Calvary's road for Jesus begins with His birth. death. The scandal for His parents began there.

The rough journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, certainly it was for a pregnant lady. The no vacancy sign when they got there in Bethlehem. The dirty stable.

The feeding trough for a cradle. It all began there. And it ends, Calvary's road ends with His death and a cruel cross, a lonely cross where everyone, even His friends, abandoned Him there in Jerusalem.

For your sake, He became poor. That's what this is all about. Now we're unwrapping the story.

[35:46] It's an incredible story. And now we've come really to the gift itself. So forth. Verse 11.

There is born to you, literally for you this day, in the city of David, a Savior who is Christ the Lord.

What a profound statement. And here's the word that comes to my mind. Glorious. Glorious.

The angel in this short little part of the sentence, the angel used three glorious words to identify the one who was born in Bethlehem, to identify the gift, the inexpressible gift of God.

Three glorious words. He said in the Greek, and here it is in the Greek, soter has esten Christos kurios. There's a lot packed into that word, that sentence.

Here's what it says, literally. Savior who is himself Christ Lord. It doesn't waste any words.

[37:02] It doesn't add any filler. It's just simply that Savior who is himself Christ Lord. This is glorious. What a glorious statement. This is the gift.

He is soter. Savior. Savior. Savior. Deliverer. And that's exactly what we needed. A Savior.

A deliverer. We are sinners. Hopeless sinners. We need a Savior. We are guilty. Guilty. We need a deliverer.

We're not, it's not a self-imposed guilt. That's not it. Where we feel guilty because of our sin. It is, listen, no bones about it, it is a God-imposed guilt that is placed upon us and rightfully so.

Justly. Because we're sinners. But He's not just any Savior. He is, according to the angel, Christos. Christ.

[38:11] He's Christ, the anointed one. Christos is the Greek equivalent for the Hebrew word Messiah. It's the same one.

That is, in short, He is the eternal Son of God. He is the glorious Son of God. The anointed one.

The one worthy of exaltation.

The one worthy of highest adoration and honor. the only one who can, with His sacrificial death, redeem us.

The only one. Soter, Savior of man. Christos, Son of God, anointed Son of God. And Kurios, this is an important word, Kurios, sovereign of all.

Kurios used in this context means supreme absolute ruler. That's who this babe is.

[39:22] Lying there in that feeding trough, there in that stable or cave or whatever it was. That's who He is.

Savior of man, Son of God, sovereign of all. And this is glorious. This is the good news of great joy that the angel announced to the shepherds and through them to the world.

To us. One more. One more profound element in the story. And this is really the response to the gift.

the part the gift giver looks for from us. Verse 19. The latter part of verse 19.

Mary, here's the statement. It's so profound. Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart.

[40:25] And here's the word. Precious. Precious. More literal translation and also more descriptive kind of expanded translation would be this.

Mary, quote, Mary hid away all these things in her heart for safekeeping. for safekeeping.

And she could bring it out every once in a while and put the things together again in her mind, all of the events together. That's what the word pondered me, to put together.

She kept them treasured in her heart. As hard as it all was for Mary, and it was hard, the whole experience, was a precious treasure to her.

That's what we understand. Priceless gift. A priceless gift, precious gift that she kept in the storehouse of her heart.

[41:34] Because, you see, Jesus was a gift to her. An incredible priceless gift to her. And listen, Jesus is a gift to you.

Every one of you. A precious, priceless gift to you if you want him. If you will believe in him. Some years ago, the Chicago police reported that an art student at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago was arrested for stealing a figure of the baby Jesus from a nativity scene that was placed in the Daily Plaza.

Stole the figure. Two witnesses saw him. Two witnesses saw him pull the three-foot figure of Jesus from the manger and just walk off with it.

And he, of course, very quickly apprehended. And when questioned about the theft, the man said this quote, I took the figure of baby Jesus because I saw it and I wanted it.

what he said. What does that mean to you? Do you want him?

[42 : 55] See, we have unwrapped the gift. That's what we've done here in Luke chapter 2. We've unwrapped it. And you see, of course, that the gift is Jesus.

And we knew that even before we started unwrapping it, didn't we? are you happy with what God has given you this Christmas?

Are you happy with that gift? Do you want him? You should. First John 5 12 says, he who has the son.

has life. Christ is given.