

## Messages From Heaven

Luke 2:22-32

Manuscript and Discussion Guide for December 10, 2023

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An oft-neglected part of the Christmas story is the personal sacrifices made by Joseph and Mary in the weeks following Jesus' birth. The rituals associated with a new child were a logistical and financial burden, and these young parents had to sacrifice and endure hardship to present Jesus to Israel in the right way. But in obedience to God, Mary and Joseph remained faithful, and we can learn much from their example.

Many years ago, I shared with this assembly about a difficult time that took place some 30 years ago.

It ended up being a rather long ordeal with a prank caller on the phone. The telephone would ring in our home—back then the phone hung in the kitchen, remember those days? You were state of the art if you had an extension phone cord about 50 feet long; you could talk in every room of the house. If you got tangled up in that chord, you could go missing for days!

The phone would ring, but nothing was ever said by this prank caller. They simply called our home, but as soon as we picked up the phone and said, "Hello," they'd pause for a moment and then hang up.

It began with a call every other day or so—usually around supper time, and with four young children, it was not a pleasant interruption. But then the calls increased to several times a day. When I was at the church office we rented back in those days, Marsha would pick up the phone and say "Hello" and they'd pause, and hang up, once or twice a day—it began to be unnerving.

Then calls began at night, sometimes the phone would ring at 2 or 3 in the morning. I felt it was my responsibility to answer every time; it could be some kind of pastoral emergency. Keep in mind this was before cell phones and caller ID.

After several months of this, I finally talked to the police about it and they said there was nothing they could do unless we set up call tracing on our phone, and then every prank call that came in, we were to log it with the Annoyance Call Center.

So, for months we logged the calls and reported them, but they were always traced to a grocery store or a gas stations or phone booth. Some of you don't know what a phone booth is; they were tall rectangular booths with a pay phone and a thick phone book inside—and you don't know what a phone book is either!

Finally, after a year of logging calls, the Call Center reached out and said they had traced a call to a home address; they knew who they were and where they lived.

They asked me: Do you want to pursue prosecution? I didn't want prosecution; I wanted an execution—something slow like starvation.

We finally decided to just have the police go over to their home. We knew them too, they were disgruntled, former church members and the police told them to stop, which they did, but not before accusing me of being the one who had been calling them; fortunately the evidence proved otherwise.

I thought about that frustrating year as I dug back into Israel's history prior to the birth of Christ.

For hundreds of years, during what we referred to as “the Hush of Heaven”—400 years of silence from God— there was no prophet, no message, no word.

During this period, Israel has suffered through a number of prank callers, so to speak, false alarms, false Messiahs!

Each false Messiah wasn't just annoying, it was nationally and personally devastating. Another Messiah-wannabe turned out to be just another prank call.

Well, they're about to receive some messages from heaven that will confirm the identity of the true Messiah.

In our last study, we listened in as the silence of heaven was shattered by 100 million angels, at least, who lit up the sky chanting in song that the Savior had just been born.

And the most unlikely people received this message from heaven! Spiritual outcasts because they couldn't keep all the ceremonial rules and regulations, the washing of hands and Sabbath observances, shepherds were considered dirty inside and out.

No wonder: they were at work 7 days a week, 24 hours a day. They were ceremonially unclean; they were banned from the temple precinct where they could worship God.

Well, God brought the worship service to them—this original Christmas choir.

After the angels disappeared, the shepherds found baby Jesus and they told Mary and Joseph what they'd seen and heard.

Now after the manger scene, the average Christian is left to believe that the most significant scenes from this original Christmas drama are over.

The typical Christmas play ends somewhere around **Luke chapter 2 and verse 20, which reads:**

*And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.*

*Luke 2:20*

And with that the Christmas play curtains close.

But it *wasn't* over after the shepherds left; it wasn't over; in fact, it was just beginning.

Some incredibly significant events take place that are nothing less than validation from heaven—confirmation—that this wasn't just another wanna-be Messiah.

Let's watch what happens as another message effectively arrives from heaven.

Let's go to the next verse, **verse 21 of Luke chapter 2:**

*And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.*

*Luke 2:21*

Three ceremonial observances now take place, according to Old Testament law.

### **The ceremony of identification.**

Eight days after Mary delivered Jesus, every Jewish baby boy would be circumcised, that is, if the baby's parents cared at all about God's commands.

Circumcision brought the boy into the national life of the Hebrew people and identified him with Abraham's household.

This covenant sign was commanded in Genesis 17 and had Jesus not been circumcised, he would not have been identified as Israel's Messiah, even though both His parents were descendants of Abraham.

Circumcision was considered so sacred a duty that it could be carried out on the Sabbath day.

A Jewish leader or doctor would perform the simple cutting away of the foreskin, a sign of fallen flesh and sinful humanity; it also acknowledged the need for a Redeemer.

And the painful cry of Jesus, the son of God, pierces the air and echoes all around; this was effectively the Lord's first moment of suffering at the hand of fallen humanity.

These were among his first tears after having taken on human flesh. In a very real way, the suffering of Christ began at His birth.

And don't overlook ongoing suffering experienced by Joseph and Mary; by this point they're ostracized, confused and alone.

The fact that they show up for this is nothing less than a statement of faith in the word of God. Written in between the lines of these verses is a revelation of their commitment; it's easy to overlook their faith and trust in God as they effectively surrender to God's will.

They had traveled to Bethlehem under a cloud of suspicion; life had become a whirlwind for them, their lives were surrendered to the will of God and the will of God was hard.

It had taken an angel to convince Joseph that Mary hadn't been unfaithful, that he wasn't to abandon her.

But that meant all the normal traditions were abandoned. There will never be a wedding ceremony for Joseph and Mary. There will never be a family festival where the entire village would be invited to the marriage celebration.

To take Mary to be his wife after she was found to be pregnant during their betrothal period was to effectively announce to everyone that he was the guy. And if he wasn't the guy, to marry her would effectively announce to everyone that he's lost his mind.

Those were the only two options for them; and this baby lying in a manger adds the exclamation point to their guilt.

There will be no way to live this down.

During His ministry 30 years later, the Jewish leaders dig up the dirty rumors and throw back into Jesus' face the accusation, in John 8:41: ***"We were not born from sexual immorality, like you!"***

In other words, "We know how you got your start, don't lecture us."

Now evidently, between **verses 21 and 22**, Joseph and Mary moved from the stable into humble quarters somewhere in Bethlehem while Joseph might have taken on a few odd jobs with his tools and calloused hands.

They won't be here for long; it won't be long before they are running for their lives to hide out in Egypt from King Herod—but that's another sermon.

Here's the significant thing taking place in this scene: even though they will never be viewed by the Jewish community as credible, godly, obedient sons and daughters of Abraham, they are still following the word of God in having their son identify with the people of God.

As you watch them here, ask yourself the question: what does it take to keep you from obeying the word of God and identifying as a follower of Jesus?

- Will you obey God on that campus and invite ridicule?
- Will you stop your career from progressing because you won't misrepresent the truth?
- Will you identify with the church and the Lord even if it causes people at your job or in your family to think you've gone off the deep end?
- What does it take for you to say, "If this is what God is going to allow into my life, I'm going to sit this one out."

Joseph and Mary are obeying the message from God even though it leads to ostracism and loneliness and misunderstanding and accusation and ridicule.

Here they come—on the 8<sup>th</sup> day, right on time—bringing forward their baby boy and sending a message to their world that even if everyone believes Jesus is illegitimate, *this family* is going to identify with the people of God and the word of God and the will of God.

Now at this ceremony, Luke tells us here ***in verse 21, look at it again:***

*And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.*

*Luke 2:21*

During this ceremony of identification with the covenant, the parents would announce the name they had chosen for their son. Only in this case, Joseph and Mary didn't have to spend any time coming up with a name they liked.

The angel had delivered to them both this name. In other words, Jesus was the name chosen for Him from eternity past. And for a very good reason.

The name Jesus is the Greek counterpart to the Hebrew name Joshua. It means “Jehovah is salvation,” or, in shorter terms, “deliverer/savior.”

I can’t help but wonder who officiated at this ceremony and heard the announcement of His name.

I wonder if the rabbi held back from laughing, or maybe he just shook his head at the audacity of this peasant couple without any references, without any connections, without any attending family members. Did they actually believe their child was going to deliver anybody?

We know from history that Jesus was a common name; there were a lot of little boys running around this region who had been named Jesus—the Greek counterpart for Joshua, the great commander and deliverer of Israel.

Everybody in Israel was longing for a redeemer, they were looking for a strong deliverer but this rabbi must have thought to himself, “From the looks of this family, it certainly isn’t going to be Him!”

So, with that, Joseph and Mary leave, holding their 8-day-old son still whimpering with pain; and they went back to their undisclosed home somewhere in Bethlehem.

But get this: they had carefully followed the word of God; they had observed the ceremony of identification.

### **The ceremony of redemption.**

This one is much more public and dramatic.

#### **Now verse 22:**

*And when the time came for their purification according to the Law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, “Every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord”).*

*Luke 2:22-23*

In other words, God had a claim on every firstborn baby boy. He was to be holy, that word means “separated unto God.”

If the male child was from the tribe of Levi, he could be drafted into service as a priest. The priests were the government, they were the senators and representatives, so to speak.

So, this ceremony acknowledged that the first-born son belonged to God and had to be bought back from God through a redemption tax of 5 shekels (Numbers 15).

Now since Christ was born into the tribe of Judah, He was not required to serve in the priestly system, but He still belonged, so to speak, to God. So, Joseph and Mary would need to pay a redemption tax to symbolically buy Him back from God.

This was called the Redemption of the Firstborn.

William Barclay, The Gospel of Luke (Westminster Press, 1975), p. 24

Get the irony of this scene:

- They are buying Jesus back from God when Jesus had come to buy a people for God.
- They were redeeming the Redeemer.
- They were paying the price for the One who had come to pay the ultimate price.

Don't miss the fact that Joseph and Mary's commitment to God's word only added to their poverty.

They've already paid the census tax in Bethlehem according to the decree of Caesar; they've paid the rabbi for outpatient surgery; and now they're paying 5 shekels, which is several day's wages.

Let me tell you, the will of God was tiring, uncomfortable, uneasy, lonely, and expensive.

But from the clues we're given here, cost was never the issue. Obedience was.

You need to know that they were *not* required by law to bring Jesus to Jerusalem for this ceremony. They could have paid the 5 shekels to a local priest and saved all the wear and tear from more travel and difficulty.

But they want to go to Jerusalem; they want to go to the temple to present Jesus to the priest and pay the redemption tax.

Why?

Because they realized that even though they were redeeming Jesus from priestly service, they were presenting Him to the Lord.

***Notice again the last phrase of verse 22:***

*They brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord.*

What sweet irony here! They didn't understand everything that was going on, but almost in childlike faith:

- they are bringing the Lord of the Temple to the Temple of the Lord. (Pentecost, p. 65)
- the Divine object of true worship has just arrived at the House of worship.
- they are presenting God the Son to God the Father.
- the one who would rip down that veil between mankind and the Holy of Holies was at that moment in the temple court.
- nobody understood it yet, but every ritual and every sacrifice and every symbol there on those temple grounds illustrated and pointed to that little baby.
- And there He was; He had come.

So far, Mary and Joseph have carefully followed all the law required and even more so. They have attended the ceremony of identification and the ceremony of redemption.

There's one more ceremony required by the law.

### **The ceremony of purification.**

According to the law, Mary was unclean following the birth of Jesus.

After 40 days, she would be required to bring two sacrifices to the priest. A turtledove would atone for her defilement having delivered a child and the issuing of blood. Another turtledove would reestablish her communion with God and the right to worship in the temple.

Now according to Leviticus chapter 12, Mary was to bring to the priest either a lamb or two birds for these sacrifices.

If she and her husband didn't have the money for a lamb, she would be allowed to bring two pigeons, or two turtledoves.

The fact that Mary brought turtledoves instead of a lamb indicated her poverty.

She would have been ushered over to the gate nearest the Sanctuary just beyond the court of Women; Mary would have presented this pair of turtledoves to the priest.

So, get this picture of it:

- She's standing there in the court of women watching the smoke of her sacrifice *ascend to heaven*, holding in her arms the final sacrifice who will *take us to heaven*.
- she can't afford to buy a lamb but the final Lamb is in her arms.

At the conclusion of this ceremony, Mary and Joseph no doubt planned to just slip away and leave unnoticed, but God had other plans.

There's a message from heaven that's about to be announced, validating that this was not some Messiah-want-to-be. This was no prank call; this was the real message that needed to be heard.

Luke tells us here in **verse 25** that a man was there by the name of Simeon, he's described as a righteous and devout man; he'd spent his life looking for the Messiah, called here, "the consolation of Israel."

**Verse 26** informs us that the Spirit of God had promised him that he would not die until he had seen the Messiah.

Evidently, he's been waiting for decades; the implication here is that he's now an old man.

So, you can imagine that for years, Simeon would come over to the temple looking at all the babies, wondering, "Is this the One? They look like they're carrying a newborn over there! I must meet them! I wonder if he's the Messiah?"

Edited from R. Kent Hughes, Luke: Volume 1 (Crossway, 1998), p. 95

And for years, he went home disappointed.

But then he meets Joseph and Mary. The Spirit of God prompts him that this newborn is indeed the Messiah!

**Verse 28 tells us:**

*He took him up in his arms and blessed God and said, "Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel."*

*Luke 2:28-32*

In other words, this baby was the One—the One who would live up to His name: Deliverer, Savior!

Anna, Luke tells us, is a prophetess, and she now comes up and begins to tell everyone on the temple grounds that Jesus is the promised Redeemer.

These are staggering announcements; heaven is delivering incredible messages.

So, get this scene here: Joseph, Mary, Anna, a crowd of curious people, and Simeon—who probably doesn't want to let go of Jesus—are all standing here. Simeon is holding the baby in his arms as tears no doubt ran down his cheeks.

And all the while the priests probably don't miss a beat; they continue with their duties as they should; sacrifices continue to be made, but here, in the middle of it all, is Jesus.

The Savior has arrived to buy us out of the kingdom of darkness and bring us into the kingdom of light and everlasting life.

Do you know Him? Who is He to you? Listen to the message from heaven. He is the *real* Messiah. Jesus the Redeemer has come!

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