

Lying in a Manger?!

An Invaluable Gift in an Unsightly Package

Introduction

The Text

- A. Chris and Minglan already so wonderfully read to us from Luke's gospel and I should like this morning to focus in particular on one little detail there in [v. 7](#). Let's read it again, I'll pray and then begin to make my way towards a reflection of sorts.

And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. (Luke 2:7)

Two Gifts

- A. I have a theory that you can test with your kids this Christmas morning if you'd like. But here's what it is . . .
- B. I want you to imagine that you have two gifts for your child.
1. One is incredibly valuable but it's small. I don't know what your kids are into, but let's say it's one of those rare Pokémon cards or something like that. (I looked into this, there are some worth upwards of \$100,000 or more. Let's imagine you've got your hands on one of those somehow.)
 2. And then the other gift is really big, but it's cheap. Maybe you got some sort of toy from the Dollar Tree where you fill it with air and it expands to a considerable size.
- C. Then let's say that you were to take the two gifts and prep them for placing under the tree.
1. So you take the big gift and put it in an even bigger box, and then you wrap it in fancy paper, shiny, with all this Christmas glitter on it, and you place this billowing ribbon up on top.
 2. And then you take the Pokémon card and you put in this beat up little bag, looks more like a piece of trash than a present (kind of like the gifts at yesterday's men's event, wrapped in a trash bag with some duct tape).
- D. Here's my theory: if both of these gifts are put under the tree, every kid everywhere, when they walk out on Christmas morning, they're going to choose the big shiny gift over the small beat up one every time—even though the smaller beat up one is immeasurably more valuable on the inside.
1. Isn't that the truth? You watch your kids this week.
 - a. When it comes time to open presents, where do they go first? It's to the big, to the fancy, to the flashy ones. Why?

- i. Because we think that's where we're going to find the best stuff, the most valuable gifts. We're drawn to it like that.

Against the Grain of the Gospel

- A. But our nature and our logic here cuts right against the grain of the gospel. It runs contrary to the way God works at Christmas in Jesus.
 - 1. You would think: if Jesus truly is God, if he truly is King of kings and Lord of lords, if he truly has come to save the world as the Christians and the Christmas carols claim . . . surely he's going to come down with pomp and power, with glamor and glory! Surely there's going to be a big billowing bow on his head. He'll look impressive!
 - 2. But he doesn't. He comes down and he looks like nothing. Just a piece of trash brushed off into the corner there in Bethlehem.
- B. I still remember when we lived in Philly, Megs and I were walking around downtown. She was about nine months pregnant with Bella at the time and we were trying to get things moving along.
 - 1. We were walking just outside of a place called Rittenhouse Square and a reporter actually stopped us to interview Megan for the evening news. As it turned out, this was the time Prince George was born to William and Kate and they were going about asking people what they thought of it, what their reactions were.
 - a. The whole world was tuning in with concern for and interest in the birth of this little prince. They were celebrating and rejoicing all around the globe.
- C. But here Jesus is born and there's no press. There's no international attention. There's no fanfare or fireworks. There's not even a place for him in the inn.
 - 1. We don't know exactly what the Greek word translated "inn" here means.
 - a. *Kataluma* could refer to an inn. It could also refer to a guestroom in a home.
 - b. But, whatever it means, the other part of the sentence in Greek is plain: *ouk ēn autois topos*: "there was no place for them . . ." And that's the point.
 - i. So he's hanging with the animals. He's laid in a manger, in a feeding trough. He's treated like trash because he looks like trash.
 - ii. But truly he's God's invaluable gift to us. Truly he's the one who's come to save.
- D. And I just simply want to ask: Why? If Jesus is God draped in humanity, if this is God's big solution to our big problem, why does he look so pathetic? Why is this the way he comes?
 - 1. I've got three reasons I'll give you for this: (1) Because the World Is Upside-Down; (2) Because Jesus Has Come to Die; and (3) Because Everyone Is Welcome.

Reason #1: Because the World Is Upside-Down

The Fall . . . and the Flip!

- A. If you're familiar at all with the Bible, then you know that in [Gen. 3](#) we have described for us what is typically referred to as "the Fall."
 - 1. There we read of how Adam and Eve, as representatives of humanity, rebel against God their Creator in an effort to be as god on their own. "We don't want him to rule over us. We will rule over ourselves, thank you."
 - a. They beheld the fruit he had forbidden and thought it held the potential to make them wise to make them like god, so they took and ate.
 - b. But in their attempt to rise up over him, truly they fall down from him. They cut themselves off from the very one they need most.
 - i. And human nature and the world has been twisted up and reeling ever since.
- B. But one of the things I have come to see in this story, that has long since captivated me, is this: "the Fall" is not just a fall, it's also a "flip."
 - 1. In other words: because of what took place there, we are not now merely living life on a lower plane, we are living life upside-down.
- C. Let me show you what I mean:
 - 1. Consider how creation is ordered by God in [Gen. 1-2](#):
 - a. God, of course, is over humanity—with the man positionally placed over the woman;
 - b. humanity is set over the animals;
 - c. and the animals are set over the vegetation.
 - 2. Now consider how the Fall is described in [Gen. 3](#). Just as God, it seems, threaded creation together in a particular order, so now, with the devil fresh on the scene these stitches are going to be ripped out right back up the seam in precisely the reverse direction:
 - a. So the fruit is leveraged by the serpent (Satan animating an animal);
 - b. given first to the woman, who then gives to the man,
 - c. who directly disobeys the command of God.
 - i. Everything is unraveling in the opposite direction. It is the explicit undoing of the created order.

3. Man's reach for wisdom and power over and against God, capsizes the entire creation! They called what was truly evil "good" and what was truly good "evil" and we've been doing it ever since.
 - a. It's as Paul puts it in [Rom. 1: " ²¹ \[A\]lthough they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. ²² Claiming to be wise, they became fools . . ." \(vv. 21–22\)](#).
 - i. And let's be clear: Paul's not talking about Adam and Eve here.
 - ii. He's talking about us.

D. And what that means is (here now we come at the point more directly):

1. What initially seems wise and strong and satisfying to us will often prove to be truly foolish and weak and empty in the end.
2. And what initially seems foolish and weak and empty to us will often truly prove to be wise and strong and satisfying in the end.

Unlocking the Mystery

A. When we get that this world is both fallen and flipped, it unlocks the mystery of the Christian life and makes sense of all the apparent paradoxes we see all throughout the Scriptures:

1. It's the poor in Spirit who get the kingdom.
2. It's the meek who inherit the earth.
3. It's those who hunger and thirst for righteousness that are filled.
4. The first shall be last and the last shall be first.
5. If you want to be great, make yourself a servant of others.
6. If you want to be free, become a slave of God.
7. If you want true maturity you must become like a child.
8. If you say you see, you're blind. If you say you're blind, you're starting to see.
9. If you try to save your life now, you will lose it; but if you lose your life for Jesus' sake, you will find it.
10. Admitting you're a fool is the beginning of true wisdom. Admitting you're weak is the beginning of true power. Admitting you're a sinner is the beginning of true righteousness. Admitting you're broken is the first step to true healing. Admitting you're lost is how you get saved.

B. This is precisely the sort of thing Mary is singing about in what's known as the Magnificat as she's contemplating the wonder that God would bring his Son into the world through her.

1. So she says in [Luke 1:52-54](#): " ⁵² [H]e has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; ⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty. ⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy . . . "

- a. She knows: the Son of God is coming into an upside-down world to put things right-side up.
 - b. But, hear me now: in order to do that he himself has to start at the very bottom.
- C. It's no surprise, then, that in an upside-down world . . .
 - 1. the King of kings comes as a servant;
 - 2. the Lord of lords is laid in a manger;
 - 3. the Creator of all is out with the animals;
 - 4. true God from true God becomes a man;
 - 5. the Light of the world is plunged into darkness;
 - 6. the Author of life will give himself over to death.
 - a. Things are not what they seem. We cannot trust our intuitions. Our intuitions are twisted. They're fallen. They're flipped.
 - i. We go after the big shiny packages and there's nothing in them.
 - ii. And we come to Christmas and see this pathetic baby in a manger, with the smell of animal dung in the air, and think: "This is the hope of all mankind?!"
- D. This is what the prophet Isaiah is getting at in [Isa. 53](#): "¹Who has believed what he has heard from us? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?² For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him.³ He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.⁴ Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted.⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed" (vv. 1-5).
 - 1. Nobody looked at him and thought: "Ah, now there's the Savior!"
 - 2. They looked right past him for another Messiah. They pushed him aside, nailed him to the cross.
 - a. They rejected him . . . even as he was saving them!
- E. It's as Paul writes in [1 Cor. 1:18](#): "[T]he word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."
 - 1. The gospel looks stupid. It sounds stupid. But it's everything!
 - 2. What else would you expect in an upside-down world?
- F. So stop chasing the big box with the shiny paper? The new job, the new spouse, the new toy, the new president, the new whatever. It won't deliver, it can't heal you, it's not going to save you.
 - 1. The solution is right here. Lying in a manger. Or right there hanging on a cross.
 - a. And that leads to what I want to say next . . .

Reason #2: Because Jesus Has Come to Die

Not an Oversight . . . But a Decree!

- A. Why does the Christmas story take this downtrodden turn here in Bethlehem? Why is there no room? Why is the Savior put in a feeding trough?
1. I'll tell you one thing. It is not because God somehow mixed up his plans or failed to prepare properly for this moment.
 - a. It's not like he's saying: "Whoops! I got everything else in order for the arrival of my son, but it seems I failed to secure the appropriate accommodations." That cannot be what is happening.
- B. This whole story has to this point been marked by the sovereign hand of God.
1. For example, in the opening verses in [Luke 2](#), when Caesar Augustus issues a decree that "[all the world should be registered](#)" (v. 1)—when he wants to take a census among those in his empire—on the surface this just seems like a greedy move from a self-centered tyrant. He wants to make sure he's squeezing all the tax money he can out of these people.
 - a. It makes sense. But it seems random.
 2. It seems random, that is, until you realize that the call for this census meant that Joseph would need to return to his hometown, which being of the line of David, meant that he had to journey to Bethlehem. And this meant that, just as Mary was due to deliver, they would be in the very town that, some 700+ years prior, the prophet Micah had foretold the Christ would be born in: "[But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days](#)" (Mic. 5:2).
 - a. In other words: behind and beneath the decree of Caesar Augustus was the decree of almighty God.
 - i. "[\[W\]hen the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman . . .](#)" (Gal. 4:4). Jesus came right on time, in precisely the town his Father intended.
- C. So it cannot be that this sovereign God somehow forgot to secure proper accommodations. Oh no. It was the Father's will that there be no room, that he be out with the animals, that he be laid in a manger.
1. But why?

- a. Don't you see? He's trying to drive home this essential point for us: His Son has not come to live in luxury and at ease in this world. He has come to die—as a sacrifice for sinners like you and I.
- D. Let me finish reading to you Paul's thought there in [Gal. 4: " ⁴ \[W\]hen the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, ⁵ to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons" \(vv. 4–5\).](#)
 - 1. He's come to bring us back to the God we once rejected. He's come to turn us and the world right-side up again. He's come to make all things new.
 - a. But the path to that new world for us leads right through the cross for him.

Every Little Detail

- A. And that's why, with every little detail we're given in this Christmas scene, it seems God is already foreshadowing the end. He won't let us miss it. Again, Jesus has come to die.
 - 1. So the "[swaddling cloths](#)" that are put around him—they're meant to remind us of the burial cloths that he'll be wrapped in when all this is done (cf. [Luke 23:53](#)).
 - 2. And regarding the "[manger](#)"—in light of this little detail, tradition going all the way back to the early church fathers held that Jesus was born in a cave used as a livestock shelter behind someone's home. And this cave, of course, is itself a foreshadowing of that rock-hewn tomb that he'll be enclosed in after death.
 - 3. The fact that there is "[no room](#)" for him in the inn is meant to foreshadow for us the fact that there will be no room made for him in the hearts of men or on this earth at all.
 - a. "¹² Pilate . . . said to them, '[W]hat shall I do with the man you call the King of the Jews?' ¹³ And they cried out . . . , 'Crucify him.' ¹⁴ And Pilate said to them, 'Why, What evil has he done?' But they shouted all the more, 'Crucify him'" ([Mark 15:12-14](#)). He will be rejected. He will be shut out. He will be crucified.
 - i. This "No Vacancy" sign illuminated for him in Bethlehem is a harbinger of the whips and nails waiting for him at Calvary.
 - 4. Regarding the shepherds who will soon come on the scene in Luke's account (and whom we'll reflect on further in a moment), commentators have pointed out that these men were likely watching sheep that would have been used in the temple for sacrifice.
 - a. So when the angels show up and direct them to the baby in the manger, it's as if they are saying: "Here is the one to whom all these other lambs have been pointing. You have been tending to the types and shadows, now go and behold the fulfillment and realization of them all. '[Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!](#)' ([John 1:29](#))."

5. Sometime after, when the magi come for a visit, the myrrh and the spices that are put before him by these men are meant to anticipate the spices that Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus and the women would bring to put around his body in burial (cf. [John 19:39](#); [Luke 23:56](#)).

B. In other words: even here at his birth, God is already preparing us for his death!

1. That's why he's come. Christmas is for the cross.
2. And because Christmas is for the cross, Christmas is for you and I. It's about God, in love, in mercy, in strength, coming to save sinners like us.

a. And that leads to the last thing I wanted to say . . .

Reason #3: Because Everyone Is Welcome

A Strange Sign

- A. I said I wanted to further reflect with you on the shepherds—and we'll do that now as I begin to draw things to a close . . .
- B. You remember, perhaps, that, while Jesus is being laid in a manger here in this cave, out in the fields, the shepherds are given quite a fright.
1. So we read in [Luke 2:8-12](#): “⁸ And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. ¹⁰ And the angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹ For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹² And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.”
 - a. It's that last line there that I wanted to focus in on with you for a moment. Again: “And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger” (v. 12).
- C. I have long wondered why this was given as the sign for these shepherds. Why would this be the sign? Why would God not give them something more spectacular, something more miraculous?
1. The magi got a star that led the way.
 2. Back when Mary was told she would carry God's child, the angel seeking to bolster her faith that such a thing was possible for God, drew her attention to the “sign” that Elizabeth, her relative, old and barren as she was, was now with child.
 - a. They got these miraculous, supernatural signs.

D. But there is nothing miraculous about this sign given the shepherds here (at least not on the surface). If there is anything out of the ordinary about this sign it actually moves in the opposite direction, doesn't it?

1. It is not remarkable because of the stunning beauty or grandeur of the thing.
2. It is remarkable because of how base and plain and humble it is.
 - a. A baby in a manger? What's a baby doing where animal's feed? Why would anyone stoop to such a thing?
 - i. So, again, this sign is not remarkable for how high and lofty it is—like a traveling star or a baby in a barren womb.
 - ii. It's remarkable for how low and menial it is.

E. And don't you see? Therein is the point! This is just the sign these shepherds needed.

1. The magi needed to see that God could work with the heavens.
2. Mary needed to see that God could work with wombs and babies.
3. These shepherds needed to see that God could come down low and get in the dirt with the outcasts.
 - a. Because, truly, that's the place they occupied in society.
 - b. As one commentator puts it: "One should not romanticize the occupation of shepherds. In general shepherds were dishonest (Sanh. 25b) and unclean according to the standards of the law. They represent the outcasts and sinners for whom Jesus came. [And that is why . . .] Such outcasts were the first recipients of the good news" (NAC).
 - i. And I might add: that is why the sign given them is a baby in a manger.

He Has Come for the Likes of Us!

A. It was really Sinclair Ferguson who first opened my eyes to this point, and I wanted to read to you from him now: "[This] was a most unusual sign. . . . 'You will find the baby lying in a manger wrapped in swaddling clothes.' . . . Why was this unusual sign so important to them? Well, for this very obvious reason. If the message had been, 'You will find him in the palace,' they would have said to one another, 'Let us now therefore not go to see this thing that has come to pass. We'll never get in.' If he had been placed in a beautiful crib in the nursery of the palace, they would have said, 'He's not for the likes of us.' But he was placed in a manger and wrapped in swaddling clothes, bands that would hold his limbs tightly in a cave at the back of a place in Bethlehem, in order to underline for these shepherds that this Savior had come for the likes of them; he has come down so far, come down so low that there is nobody so far gone, nobody so low that they would ever be in a position to say, 'I know he can save others, but he can't save me.'

Why? Why does he come like this? He comes like this to underline to us that there is nothing in him. He is so gentle, meek, and lowly. He is so gracious. He comes into such poverty. He comes down to the very lowest of the low to underscore for us that there is no obstacle in him to anyone having him as their Savior. [On the one hand] [t]here is no one who can say, 'He is not qualified to save me'

because he is God of God. He is light of light. He is very God of very God. He is qualified to save the highest, the greatest. [But, on the other hand,] he is . . . laid in a manger because he is qualified to come and save the most ordinary and the least and the poorest. There is no obstacle in the Lord Jesus to you coming and trusting in him. If there is an obstacle, that's found in you and not in him . . .” (The Dawn of Grace, 31-32).

B. You hear what he’s saying, don’t you? It’s amazing.

1. Yes, sure, Jesus was laid in manger because it’s an upside-world; and because he’s come to die. We’ve already established those things.
2. But he’s also laid in a manger so that we can know: he’s come for the likes of us!
 - a. He’s out in the open, in a place of vulnerability and humility, because he wants you to know: you’re welcome to draw near.
 - i. He’s not laid in a crib somewhere behind the guarded walls of a palace where the commonfolk can’t get to him.
 - ii. He’s not even laid, as we might think, upon the mercy seat in the Most Holy Place of the temple, where unclean sinners wouldn’t dare tread.
 - iii. No, he’s laid in a manger—so that any who would come . . . can!

C. However low your place in society, however dirty you feel, however unworthy, there’s a place for you around this manger in Bethlehem.

1. There are no bouncers at the door.
2. There is no price of admission.
3. You don’t have to clean yourself up before you come.
 - a. You come as you are . . . and he’ll take you from there.

Come and See

A. So, we’re back around the tree. And I get it . . .

1. We live in a world full of big boxes wrapped in shiny paper.
2. And in such a world, this helpless baby in a manger looks like nothing worthy of your attention—let alone your hope and your trust and your life. It’s just a piece of trash left under the tree.
 - a. But I am telling you: this is the most valuable gift you and I could ever be given—more precious than we can even begin to comprehend.

B. So I leave you with the words of Philip in [John 1:46](#).

1. When Nathanael was pushing back on this idea that Jesus could be the Christ saying, “[Can anything good come out of Nazareth?](#)” (he looks like a piece of trash left under the tree), do you remember how Philip responds? “[Come and see.](#)” Come and see!

- a. This Christmas, I invite you to do the same!