

# To give his life as a ransom for many

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[ 0 : 00 ] This morning's reading comes from Luke chapter 1, verse 1 to 20, and can be found on page 805 of the Church Bible. Okay.

In those days, a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town.

And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to 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, who was with child.

And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. 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.

And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them.

[ 1 : 02 ] And they were filled with great fear. 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. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

And this will be a sign for you. You will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a great multitude of heavenly hosts, praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased. When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.

And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the baby lying in a manger.

And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child.

And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart.

And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. Let us receive God's word to us today. Amen. Thank you, Maddie and Avery.

[ 2 : 14 ] Yeah, let's give them a round of applause. Great reading. Well, welcome, everybody, and Merry Christmas. Let me add my greetings to Oscars. If you don't know me, my name is Kevin, and it's wonderful to have you with us this morning.

To those maybe that are visiting us for the first time, a warm welcome. Great to have you part of the Watermark family today. And to those that have been here 10,000 times, welcome to you as well. Merry, Merry Christmas this morning. It's a real joy to be together. Now, Christmas is a very special time of the year, isn't it? I'm sure many of us have been preparing for weeks.

We've been thinking about this time. Maybe you're planning to go away somewhere. Maybe you're preparing a Christmas meal. Maybe you've been shopping and buying gifts for friends or family or loved ones.

As a church, we've been preparing for this time and thinking about Christmas over the last couple of weeks. Christmas is a wonderful, wonderful time of the year. But we also know it can be a difficult time of the year.

[ 3 : 20 ] Maybe some of you have family that are far away, other sides of the world. Maybe some of us here are remembering those that are loved ones that have passed away. And so Christmas is this dichotomy in our hearts.

We feel the joy and the wonder of it. But also we remind it at times like this of the broken world in which we live. The pain in which we live. And Christmas reminds us that there are no perfect days.

There are no perfect holidays. No perfect life stories in this world. And yet it's that. It's the dichotomy in which we live which amplifies the wonder of Christmas.

Because Christmas reminds us that in the midst of all the chaos, in the midst of all the tears, in the midst of all the pain and the brokenness of our world, God has not forgotten us. God has not abandoned us.

The God who made all things has come to us. As the words of that great hymn say, Long lay the world in sin and error pining till he appeared and our souls felt its worth.

[ 4 : 20 ] A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices for yonder breaks a new and glorious morn. Christmas reminds us that in the midst of a broken world, there is hope.

Because God has not forgotten us. God has not abandoned us. Now, the question we as a church have been considering over the last few weeks is, Why did Jesus come? Why did Jesus come? That Jesus Christ came into history 2,000 years ago, came into Israel, that's a fact of history. But why Jesus came? That's Christianity. And so we've been thinking and asking this question, Why is it that Jesus came?

And the passage that Maddie and Avery read to us this morning answers both of those questions. It tells us what happened, but it also tells us why it happened. And so I want to just take a couple of minutes and I want us to think about this passage, this very, very famous and well-known passage in Luke's Gospel.

And I want us to think about three things here. I want us to think about the royal puppet at Jesus' coming, the real purpose for Jesus' coming, and the right response to Jesus' coming.

[ 5 : 26 ] So let's think about these things quickly. Firstly, the royal puppet at Jesus' coming. The opening few verses of our passage here, Luke tells us the historical details around Jesus' birth.

And it involves the census that Caesar Augustus, the Roman emperor of the time, issued throughout the Roman world for all people to be registered. Look at how he says in verse 1, In those days the decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world, that's the Roman empire, should be registered.

Now, why does Luke tell us this? Well, on the one hand, remember, Luke is a historian. At the beginning of Luke's Gospel, he tells us that one of the reasons he wrote his Gospel was because a wealthy Roman official called Theophilus had heard the stories of Jesus and wanted to know whether it was true.

And so he commissioned this man called Luke to study the historical facts and to gather the evidence and to write an account of the story of Jesus of Nazareth. And so that's what Luke is doing.

He's giving us the historical facts, the account of Jesus' birth. And one of the things that's so great about Luke's Gospel in particular is all the detail he gives, names and places and dates.

[ 6 : 36 ] And so that's what he says here. He talks about when Caesar Augustus was Caesar and when Quirinius was governor of Syria, a decree went out. And so Luke is telling us about how it is that Joseph and Mary came to be in Bethlehem.

And so why are Joseph and Mary in Bethlehem at this time? This wasn't where they lived. Well, it's because on the one hand, Caesar Augustus had decided everyone in the known world, everyone in the Roman Empire, should go to their hometown where their family comes from and be registered in his census.

So look what he says here. In those days, the decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. Verse 3. All went to be registered, each in his own hometown. And so Joseph went up from Galilee to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem.

Now, why did Caesar want this? Why issue a census? I mean, censuses in the old days wasn't like census these days. Caesar wasn't interested in mean, average household income or, you know, education levels, those kinds of things.

Why did Caesar want a census of all the Roman Empire? Well, on one hand, it's an exercise in political and economic power. Caesar wants to know how many people he has and specifically how many taxes he can expect to raise from various people in different parts of his empire.

[ 7 : 55 ] Caesar's calculating how many taxes can he raise. It's an economic exercise. But it's also an exercise in political power because all these foreign lands that he's conquered, Caesar wants to remind them, I am Caesar.

You belong to me. He wants to know who lives where so that they bring them into the legal and the fiscal system so that these people know they belong to Caesar. Caesar's exercising his power, his authority, saying, I am king in this place.

That's the reason why they're there. And so he issues the census and Mary and Joseph go up from Galilee to Bethlehem, a small town about eight miles outside of Jerusalem, just at the time that Mary's getting ready to give birth.

But what Luke wants us to see here, the author, is that's not the real reason they're in Bethlehem, is it? Actually, Luke wants to tell us that behind the rule and the reign of Caesar, there is another king that's orchestrating everything according to his plans.

Caesar may be king of the Roman world, but in some senses, he's just a puppet king. He's in the hands of the sovereign God that is orchestrating everything. So look at what Luke wants us to see. Luke wants us to see the real reason that Mary and Joseph are here in Bethlehem is because the God of the Bible had promised hundreds, even thousands of years earlier that there would come a king, someone of the house in the lineage of David, the great king, someone who would come and fulfill the promises of God, someone who would restore the fallen kingdom and the broken kingdom. [ 9 : 25 ] Heaven and earth's true king would come who would crush Satan and the forces of evil, and he would be born in a town called Bethlehem, the city of David.

And so 700 years before not only Jesus is born, but Caesar Augustus is born, Micah, which some I read to us earlier, says this, that there will come a king, heaven and earth's true king, who will be born in the town of Bethlehem, the ruler, the one who is from ancient of days, the one who is without beginning and end, who will come from the city of David and bring peace.

Friends, that's the reason why Joseph and Mary are in Bethlehem. Caesar Augustus is actually just a puppet in the hand of the sovereign God who is arranging everything, organizing all of history to accomplish his plans, his purposes.

And one thing that scripture tells us again and again is that behind the power of kings and rulers, presidents and premiers and everyone in authority, lies the sovereign God, the God of all creation, who is Lord over every single life.

And even the self-serving actions of Caesar Augustus, the most powerful man in the ancient world in this time, is simply doing God's bidding. Moving people around the ancient world to accomplish God's plans, to fulfill God's purposes, to do what God had predestined to take place, that the Christ, the son of David, would be born where God wanted him to, in Bethlehem.

[ 10 : 53 ] The puppet king behind Christ's coming. But we still haven't got to why Jesus came. Why did Jesus come? Well, Luke wants to tell us that as well.

What was the purpose? And of course, scripture has many answers. Jesus came to fulfill the promises of the Old Testament. Jesus came to restore the broken kingdom that Adam and Eve had messed up.

Jesus came to bring, restore lasting peace to this broken world. But Luke here tells us another reason. So look at what verse 8 onwards says. If you've got a Bible, verse 8 says this.

In the same region, there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.

And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone all around them.

Must have been a rather unnerving sight, right? This brilliant angel appears in their midst, surrounded by brilliance of glory. And they were filled with great fear. Makes sense. And the angel says, Fear not, behold, I bring you good news of great joy for all people.

[ 11 : 51 ] For unto you is born this day, in the city of David, a Savior who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you. You will find a baby, wrapped in swaddling cloths, and lying in a manger.

Now, one of the things that I only discovered in recent years, I'm embarrassed to say, is that the image that most of us think of, when we think of Jesus lying in a manger, is probably not all that historically accurate.

In fact, I confess our design that we have here, that we designed for this Christmas, even this is not actually historically that accurate. Why? What do we think of when we think of Jesus lying in a manger?

We think of a wooden manger, a crib like this, with a straw hanging out the sides, and cows kind of eating out. Actually, that's probably not what happened. In the ancient world in Israel, Israel is a very arid country.

Wood was very scarce. There wasn't much wood around at all. Wood was almost never used for building, except in very expensive cases. Wood was extremely expensive. But what was far more

available was stone, right?

[12:53] Everyone built out of stone. And so actually, the manger that Jesus would have been lying in was probably a manger carved out of limestone. I think we've got a picture of something like this, right?

This is what archaeologists have found all over Egypt, Israel. And still, limestone mangers are used in the Middle East. And why does Luke, but Luke keeps on telling us, Luke tells us three times in this passage, that Jesus is wrapped in swaddling cloths, and laid in a manger.

Three times Luke tells us this. Why is Luke, in the system, why is Luke making such a big deal of the fact that Jesus was placed in a manger? Well, as I said earlier, Luke is a historian, but Luke was also a medical doctor.

He was a physician. Luke was very attentive to detail. And Luke wouldn't write anything without having a reason for it. Papyrus in those days was extremely expensive.

Why is Luke making such a big deal that the Messiah would be wrapped in cloths and laid in a stone manger, in a manger? Friends, one of the reasons is that Luke wants us to see that even here, at the beginning of Jesus' life, the reason why Jesus came.

[14:02] See, at the end of Luke's gospel, in the very end of the gospel, Luke is going to tell us about another time when Jesus' helpless body will once again be wrapped in linen cloths and laid in a stone enclosure.

Except that time, it won't be a manger. It'll be a tomb. Listen to how Luke writes it at the end of his gospel. This is Luke 24. There was a man, Joseph of Arimathea, went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus.

Then he took it down and wrapped it in a linen shroud and laid him in a tomb cut out of stone where no one had ever been lain. Friends, you see what Luke is doing here?

Luke is giving us a sign right at the early of the gospel, right at the very beginning. He's pointing us on a sign. He's saying, this baby that was born, these are indications, early indications. And throughout the whole of Luke's gospel, Luke is going to tell us that Jesus was born to die.

The reason that Jesus Christ came was to be hang on a cross, to be taken down from the cross, to be put in a tomb and to rise again to die for the sins of the world. And Luke is telling us Jesus was born to die.

[15:05] That's why Jesus came. To die on the cross. As Isaiah the prophet prophesied 700 years before, Jesus would take upon himself the punishment, the chastisement of all of us, our sins, those who come to him and trust in him.

Jesus would take our punishment upon himself and be punished and die in our place so we don't need to die. Later on in Mark's gospel, Jesus speaking about himself and he says this, for the son of man, talking about himself, came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.

Jesus came to exchange his life. He said, I will give up my life. I will die so that you can live. You deserve to die, but I will die that you can live. That's why Jesus came, to give his life as a ransom and exchange for all of us.

So we can be free from the bondage of sin and guilt, free from shame and dishonor, free from the power of hell. Friends, you may know the story of Zacchaeus, right? Very famous story.

Later on in Luke's gospel, chapter 19, Jesus goes and finds a man called Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus was a tax collector. A tax collector was somebody that sold out on his people. He was a traitor.

[16:12] Rather than serving his own nation, he served the enemy, the Romans. And so he's a traitor. He's a sinner. But he's also a man that has a lot of shame in his life. He brought shame on himself, shame on his family.

He was despised. He was a social outcast. He was morally dubious. He was probably also a thief. He would overtax people and pocket the money himself. And so here's a man who's a social outcast.

He's morally dubious. He's brought shame on his family. And Luke tells us, why would he do all this? Because he's a slave. He's a slave to the love of money. And so here's a man that his whole world is falling apart.

And Jesus goes and finds him. And Jesus goes and has a meal with him. And Jesus pours out his love on him. And Jesus tells him that he's come. And look at what he says at the end of that conversation.

He says, I, I, the Son of Man, I came to seek and save the lost. Friends, this is why Jesus came. For you and for me to seek us out.

[ 17 : 14 ] Nothing about Jesus' life was an accident. Everything was purposed and planned and progressed towards this direction until ultimately he would end up on the cross for you and for me, for your children and my children, for your parents, for your neighbors, for your friends, for the great people of Hong Kong.

Jesus came to die. And we spoke earlier about the puppet king, Caesar Augustus, this king who's, who's actually serving the hands of God, motivated by his own insecurity and power, whatever his reasons, instigates this empire-wide census, but actually all the work he was doing was just to serve God's plans and purposes.

Well, friends, can't you see the same as Caesar Augustus, even more so Pontius Pilate and all the religious leaders. They take Jesus, they put him through a sham trial, they sentence him to death, they condemn him, beat him, mocked, tortured, ultimately crucified on the cross, but all this is simply doing what God had planned and purposed hundreds, thousands, millennia before that God, that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, would come to earth to die on the cross for you and for me in our place.

And here we have at the beginning of Luke's gospel, this good news account. Luke is pointing us in that direction. Jesus wrapped in linen cloths, placed inside a stone manger, just like he will in 33 short years' time.

And if there's any doubt about it, look at what the angel says. Look in verse 10. He says, Fear not, behold, I bring you good news, good news of great joy for all people, for unto you, for you, is born this day in the city of David, not just a friend, not just a therapist, not just an advisor or a life coach, a Savior, a Savior, one who would save us from our sins, one who would rescue us from the penalty of death, one who would take the shame and the guilt that we carry and bring us back to God.

[ 19 : 10 ] Unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, Christ the Lord, good news of great joy. Friends, this is what Christmas is about. Why did Jesus come?

To save sinners like me, like you, to rescue us from our guilt and our shame, to free us from the power of hell and the wrath of God, to save us from ourselves by dying on the cross in our place and rising again three days later to bring us newness of life.

Friends, do you know him like this? Many of us here know the story of Christmas, but do you know the Christ of Christmas? Do you know Jesus, the one who came for you?

The one who loved you so much that he came to die for you? Friends, have you encountered his saving grace? Have you felt the forgiveness of sin?

Have you known his transforming love and the power of Christ that makes our lives new? Friends, do you know that he loved you personally enough to go to the cross for you? Enduring its shame and its dishonor to free you from the power and the bondage of sin and hell and to make you new again.

[ 20 : 22 ] That's why Jesus came. This is who he is, the Savior for all who cannot save themselves. So, how should we respond to this? Well, in this passage, Luke tells us how he wants us to respond and he does this by showing us the responses of three people in the story.

And so, look at what happens here. But firstly, we need to clarify something because this passage has kind of got a dichotomy or what it seems like a contradiction. Because look at verse 10.

Verse 10, the angel says to shepherds, Fear not, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people, for all people everywhere. But then, in verse 14, the angels say, Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace amongst those with whom God is pleased.

So, in other words, on one hand, it seems like this good news is for everyone. Anybody can accept it. But on the other hand, it sounds like it's only for those that God is pleased. Friends, in the Bible, God tells us again and again that the good news of great joy is freely available for all people.

No one is too bad. No one is too far gone. No one is undeserving. No one is too bad. No one is not good enough. No people group or ethnicity is excluded.

[ 21 : 39 ] And yet, it's only available to those who will respond and receive it. Those who will come to Him. Those who respond to the good news of great joy.

Friends, the good news will be utterly meaningless to you unless you respond to it. So, how should we respond? Well, look at verse 20 with me. Verse 20 says, the shepherds returned glorifying God and praising Him for all they had seen and heard as it had been told them.

How should we respond? Firstly, praise Him. Praise Him. What does it mean to praise somebody? Maybe you praise a student at school. You praise a colleague for their great work. You sing someone's praises.

To praise someone is to speak of the excellency of someone, the wonder, the brilliance of somebody. Friends, praise Him. In light of all that Jesus has done for you and for me that God has come to rescue us and save us.

How should we respond? Leave this place full of praise and wonder at what God has done for you. Will you praise Him? How will you return home today? Will you praise and glorify the God who came for you to save you and rescue you by dying on the cross?

[ 22 : 49 ] Those who know the wonder of Christmas find it easy to worship and praise. They left praising and glorifying for all that they'd seen and heard. Praise Him.

Secondly, let's treasure Him. Verse 19 says this, Mary treasured all these things, pondering them in her heart. To treasure something is to take something and put it deep, deep in your heart and to think about it, to ponder it, to reflect on it, to go back to it again and again and again.

It's not just to think about it once upon a time and then move on. It's to go back to it and draw on it for your life the rest of the year. Friends, can you this year ponder the good news of great joy?

To treasure it deeply in your heart. In a few weeks time, Christmas is going to feel like long gone. In March, April and May this year, Christmas is going to feel like a million miles away.

But the good news of Jesus that He came to die for you, to rise for you, to live for you, to save you, treasure that in your heart. Let that be a wellspring to which you return again and again and again.

[ 23 : 53 ] Friends, maybe the very best thing you can give yourself to in 2026, is to follow in the footsteps of Mary and to treasure deeply the wonder of Christmas, that God Himself has come for you and me.

And then thirdly, how should we respond? Tell others of Him. Did you notice what the shepherds did? Verse 16, it says, they went with haste. They found Mary and Joseph and the baby lying in the manger.

And when they saw it, they made known all that had been told them from the beginning concerning this child. Friends, what did they make known? They made known what the angels had told them, that God had come to earth to save and rescue them.

In this day has been born in the city of David for you, a Savior, Christ the Lord, who has come to rescue you and to save you from your sins. Friends, the good news of Jesus is too good to keep for yourselves.

Maybe the greatest Christmas present you can give your kids this year is not a new iPad or a new iPhone or annual pass at Disneyland. Maybe the greatest gift you can give your kids this year is the good news of great joy that Jesus Christ has come to live for them, to die for them and to rise again.

[ 25 : 05 ] Don't keep it to yourself. Make known all that God has made known to you. So friends, the angels are absolutely right. When they told us the first worshipers, the good news of great joy for them and for us, Christ the Lord has come so that we can be ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven because God has come to us.

Let's pray together. Well, Jesus, thank you so much for coming. God, thank you for the wonder, the wonder of Christmas. That God, you have not left us, you have not abandoned us.

But God, in the midst of all the chaos, all the brokenness, all the pain of this world, you, God, have come to be with us. Not just as a friend, not just as a life coach, not just as a moral teacher, you've come to be our savior, to do what we could never do for ourselves, to die on the cross for us, to rise again, that we too may rise with you.

God, write this in our hearts. Help us to treasure this deeply, I pray, in your great and wonderful name. Amen. Amen.