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## Comfort From the Christmas Story

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TEXT:

Genesis 3:14-15 (NIV)

So the Lord God spoke to the serpent. He said, "Because you have done this, you are set apart from all livestock and all wild animals. I am putting a curse on you. You will crawl on your belly. You will eat dust all the days of your life. I will make you and the woman hate each other. Your children and her children will be enemies. Her son will crush your head. And you will bite his heel."

Micah 5:2 (NIV)

The Lord says, "Bethlehem Ephrathah, you might not be an important town in the nation of Judah. But out of you will come for me a ruler over Israel. His family line goes back to the early years of your nation. It goes all the way back to days of long ago."

Luke 2:1-11 (NIV)

In those days, Caesar Augustus made a law. It required that a list be made of everyone in the whole Roman world. It was the first time a list was made of the people while Quirinius was governor of Syria. Everyone went to their own town to be listed.

So Joseph went also. He went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea. That is where Bethlehem, the town of David, was. Joseph went there because he belonged to the family line of David. He went there with Mary to be listed. Mary was engaged to him. She was expecting a baby. While Joseph and Mary were there, the time came for the child to be born. She gave birth to her first baby. It was a boy. She wrapped him in large strips of cloth. Then she placed him in a manger. That's because there was no guest room where they could stay.

There were shepherds living out in the fields nearby. It was night, and they were taking care of their sheep. An angel of the Lord appeared to them. And the glory of the Lord shone around

them. They were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news. It will bring great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you. He is the Messiah, the Lord.

Matthew 1:22-23 (NIV)

All this took place to bring about what the Lord had said would happen. He had said through the prophet, "The virgin is going to have a baby. She will give birth to a son. And he will be called Immanuel."

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I would guess this service is coming to many, especially in the United States, who are at their home early on this Christmas morning, December 25th, and they're in a home where they have a Christmas tree. It's still a tradition for many in the United States and many around the world to gather around a tree at the Christmas time, maybe even put presents under the tree, decorate a tree. And many of these trees are received from Christmas tree farms, or people go out in a tree area and cut one down, maybe in a forest area. And in thinking of trees and the comfort of the Christmas story, it's only so comforting in bringing joy to people who understand what's taking place in the Christmas story. And it reminds me, you know, thinking of trees and going into the forest to cut down a Christmas tree and bring it out and put it in our home, reminds me of that great expression: "Sometimes we can't see the forest for the trees." And the imagery, of course, is someone walking out in a forest and all they can see around them are the details of the forest: the needles, and the ground, and maybe some of the plants there and the trees in front of them. But their view of the forest and any clearing that they might see is blocked because they can't see the whole forest while they're in it. All they can see is the details in front of them.

And that's sometimes how people experience Christmas. They see the details, they hear the details of the Christmas story, but they don't understand the larger picture of what's happening in our world. And to take great comfort from the Christmas story, we need to understand the larger narrative of what's happening. And you know, there are many who are known as "Chreasters" in the Christian community. They come at Christmas and they come at Easter and they hear the details of the Christmas story. They hear the details of the Easter story, but they really can't tie it into a larger worldview that changes and shapes their whole life. They miss the forest for the trees, the details of the holidays, they understand, they hear the story, but they don't understand the larger picture that brings such comfort and joy to people.

And so, as we focus specifically today on a narrative around the Christmas story, we want to do it in the context of the larger story of Christmas. And to do that before we get to the details of how Luke recorded the Christmas story for us, I want to go way back to Genesis and Genesis 3, where the story begins. You and I and human beings were formed and fashioned at that point by God, placed on the earth as image-bearers of Him. We were created just a little beneath the angels, and we were the crown of his creation. And God placed us here and He gave us an opportunity to care for the world that He created. And he gave us choice. And of course, this scripture tells us that we disobeyed one choice that he gave us. We were not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, but the serpent, the evil one, came and deceived Adam and Eve, those first human beings, and they disobeyed God. And the whole world changed at that point. And a curse came upon the world. And Genesis 3 says, God even cursed the evil one, referred to as the serpent. The Lord God said to the serpent, "Because you've done this, you are cursed more than all the cattle, more than every beast of the field. On your belly you'll go and dust you will eat all the days of your life." And then he said, "I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your seed and her seed." He, the seed that comes from woman, "He shall bruise you on the head and you shall bruise him on the heel." This was to the evil one. God said this in his curse to Satan. He said, there's going to come one from woman, a seed. This is really the first mention of the Christmas story in the Scripture. Way back at the very beginning, this narrative was unfolding. This account of what God was going to do in the world when he prophesied in saying there's going to be a woman. And it's really a reference to the virgin birth because women don't have seeds. The seed came from God and was placed in this woman and this seed was going to become a man, be born and become a man in the world who would bruise the head of the evil one. And so we have that first reference there that God was doing something.

In Micah, then, you transfer several thousand years later in the Old Testament. This is 720 years before Christ was born. So, thousands of years passed from the beginning of time in Genesis. And the Prophet Micah is raised up by God and he foretells the location where this child would come from when he says, you know, God through Micah and his spirit says, "You, oh, Bethlehem, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me, one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from old, from ancient times," referring to the fact that Christ was there in the beginning. Christ, all things were created by Him and for him. And he was going to be that seed in woman and that man would come out from woman there and be one who was the ruler of Israel, the ruler of God's people. And this person would enter the world through Bethlehem. All of this took place, Matthew says, referring to the prophecies in Isaiah, all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord

through the Prophet. Behold, a virgin shall be with child, shall bear a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which translated means God with us.

And so then we pick up the details of the Christmas story, knowing that human beings fell away from God and the Earth was cursed and the evil one was cursed, and God needed to do something about it. And so, at the time when the time had fully come, God would send his son. And of course, that's what the Christmas story is about. Luke tells us these details of the story and Luke 2, starting with verse one, when he says, "In those days, Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world, and everyone went to their own town to register. So Joseph..." Now Joseph was this gentleman who was chosen by God to be the stand-in earthly Father of Jesus. And Joseph went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem, the town of David, because he belonged to the house of the line of David. And he went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting this child. Of course, Mary knew at this point that she was carrying a special child and God had spoken to her about it. And in God's unique way his plan was unfolding through this couple, Joseph and Mary. This is the larger picture. When we see the details, we might miss it if we don't understand. One comforting reality that we can grasp in the Christmas story is that God is unfolding a plan and no one can stop his plan in the world.

I mean, there were many who wanted to stop the birth of this king. And King Herod was agitated, and all of the people were greatly disturbed when they heard about the star that was in the sky and that the wise men were following the star to find the birth of a new king. And the evil one was behind the scenes wanting to destroy this king as he came into the world. And all of this unfolds by God's perfect plan, in God's perfect timing. Just as the prophecies had said a child was going to be born of a virgin, wasn't married yet, that child would come forth out of Bethlehem. There is a God, an omnipotent God who sits on the throne. He is sovereign. He reigns over the entire earth. And the Christmas story can be a comfort to us when we see that nothing can thwart his plans. He will bring about his plans in the world and nothing will stop him.

Now, Luke continues saying, while, they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son, and she wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn. It's interesting how God works in the world. Sometimes He works in very flashy ways. We read in the Old Testament. Sometimes there's great power exhibited by God, but very often God's work in the world takes place in simple, humble, unsuspecting places and unsuspecting times, and it's often very personal in

nature. I think there's something very comforting in the larger story of Christmas, in how God could have come into the world knowing who He is and His Majesty, his power, his might, that he is king of all kings, that no one even matches closely to his glory. He could have come in many ways, but he came in a humble way through a young lady, into humble means, in an unsuspecting place, in an unsuspecting time. It shows us, I think, about his gentleness, his kindness. It shows us about his desire to see all people, to be involved, that there's no one hidden from his sight. There's no place that he doesn't know about and isn't aware of. There's no one he doesn't know their name. God is very personal in nature, and he is involved in details in our lives. He not only knows our name, but the Scripture says he knows the very number of hairs on our head.

Which leads to another comforting aspect of the story. Not only is God unfolding a plan that won't be thwarted by anyone, and that he's very personal in nature and often very touching to us in simple and humble ways. But his plan is motivated, and it's motivated most deeply by his love for us and his desire for us to come to know his goodness and his kindness, his glory, his greatness. God's plan that's unfolding – and we see this in Christmas so clearly – is a plan that's motivated by his love for you and for me and for humankind.

Luke continues, saying there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shown around them. And they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all people. For today in the town of David, a savior has been born to you. He is the Messiah, Christ the Lord.” Here is a demonstration of God's love. He sent a Savior into the world, into this broken world that wanders its own way. Without him, he invaded our world, came to us in a gentle and humble way, all motivated by his love to bring salvation that would provide possible joy for all people in the world. A messiah, a savior. This is God's love: “for God so loved the world that He sent His one and only son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish” and suffer the consequences of their sin for all eternity. But they will be welcomed into eternity for eternal life with God because of His great love for us.

Such comfort in the Christmas story, the larger picture of what's happened in the world and humanity is broken and the earth doesn't function as God intended to it. And there's pain and suffering and hurt and heartache and the propensity of the human heart, the sinfulness of the human heart causes us to hurt each other and really wreak havoc in the earth. But God came to us through his son in a gentle and humble way, motivated by his care, by his love for us to

provide for us a way to eternity in a better place. To redeem us, to rectify us with himself, to make us whole. Christmas can be such a comforting story when you understand the larger picture beyond the details of how it happened, which show God's intricate hand being involved in the affairs of human beings. But beyond those details is this larger picture that demonstrates a great God who cares about us deeply, who loves us with an everlasting love. And we see in this story that God disrupted Mary's life and disrupted Joseph's life so that they might become more dependent on him to help be a part of his purposes in the world.

Friend, if you're listening today, I want to ask you: do you understand the larger picture of what's unfolding in the world around us? In the midst of all the we hear about nations and economies and on our news, something behind the scenes is going on that's far more important. It's the work of God through his spirit in the world. Being patient with the world, not wanting any to perish, but more and more to come back to him, to repentance and to eternal life. And his spirit is drawing us and it's inviting us. And those that come to know and come to believe are part of his hands and feet in the world, reaching out to those around us with the word of life, the news of life through Jesus, the great hope of salvation in Him. Are you available to God, open to what He has for you? Are you listening for his spirit? This Christmas, Sunday morning, is the time when Christ came into the world and the Scripture says, you know, as they were preparing for his birth, there was no room for him at the inn; it was full. They turned him away. He came into his own, but his own did not receive him, but as many as received him to them. He gives the right to become children of the most high God. The way to God, the way to wholeness, the way to eternal life is through Jesus Christ our Lord. He would eventually, as he grew, go to the cross to pay the penalty for our sin so that you and I could be forgiven and stand whole and righteous before God and be accepted by Him. Not only is this something we need to apply in our lives and be open to, but we want to be sharing this to others so that they might grasp the great comfort of the Christmas story. Jesus often said those who have ears to hear, let them hear.

Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, thank you for this time to open your word and look into what you've revealed to us about what is true about history and how you've worked in the world. Thank you for your sovereign rule in the affairs of men. And you can assure us, in your word and by your spirit, that your hand will not be thwarted and you will bring to fruition the good you are working for in the world around us. And thank you that you do this in such tender and gentle and humble and loving ways, and that your work is motivated by your love to help people see who you are and get caught up in your goodness. And we were designed for this. Give us ears to hear this, receive it in our hearts, live it out before you, and then give

us opportunity to continue to be your hands and feet in the world in the way we live and the way we serve and even what we share with others. We ask that your spirit would work this in us. Strengthen your church in the world by the power of your spirit. We give you praise and we give you thanks. And we honor you for who you are and for what you've done through the sending of your son Jesus. We praise you. It is in Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.