

## Messy Christmas

Luke 2:1-7 - NCBC, December 17, 2017

Main Point: **God sovereignly uses our mess to fulfill His saving purposes.**

- God uses messy global circumstances to fulfill His saving purposes (2:1-3)
  - Prophetic silence (400 years)
  - Political unrest
  - Sinful leaders
  - Financial troubles
- God uses messy personal circumstances to fulfill His saving purposes (2:4-7)
  - 70 miles uphill
  - Pregnant deadlines
  - Shameful gossip
  - Prophetic mandates
  - Distressing arrival

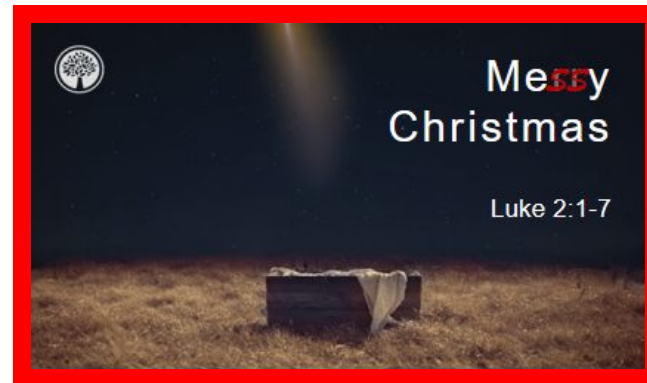
Application: **Marvel at God who enters your mess to save you.**

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### Opening Announcements:

- 12/24 Sunday Combined Service: 10am
- 12/31 Sunday Normal Schedules for both services
- Update from Dustan & Becca King

<<O Come O Come Emmanuel>>

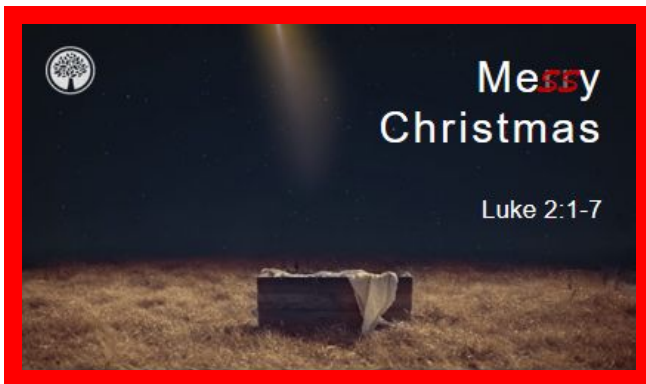


Emmanuel means God is with us. The living holy God who reigns supreme over all things – He Himself is right here, with us, in us, forever! See His love and His grace towards your sin – believe in His forgiveness and cleansing power – and rejoice! By faith in Jesus Christ nothing can separate us from His love and His presence forevermore.

Let's joyfully continue our worship of our God who is with us by opening the Holy Scriptures to **Luke chapter 2**. Today we want to consider **verses 1-7**, and next Sunday we will consider **verses 7-21** as we seek to worship our God of rescue and salvation this Christmas.



If you don't have a Bible with you this morning, please raise your hand so we may give you a Bible. You are welcome to take this Bible home as our gift to you, or just simply return it after our service by placing it on the table in the back of the room.



The title of today's message is "Messy Christmas" as the first **seven verses of Luke 2** really focus on the messy human backdrop for the birth of Jesus the Messiah. Next Sunday on Christmas Eve, we will consider Heaven's

response to the Son of God humbly entering our mess with such grace and truth.

So today please stand in honor of the reading of God's Word as I read from **Luke 2**, from the **English Standard Translation**:

*In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. <sup>2</sup> This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. <sup>3</sup> And all went to be registered, each to his own town. <sup>4</sup> 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, <sup>5</sup> to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. <sup>6</sup> And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. <sup>7</sup> 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.*

**In this way, God took on human flesh and revealed His glory to us. You may be seated.**

**Let's Pray.**

When it comes to receiving and opening gifts – not all gifts are created equal. Some gifts immediately bring exuberant thanksgiving – you open the gift and immediately respond – it's exactly what I hoped for! Thank you, thank you!!

But receiving other gifts requires honest humility and personal reflection first before the gift will ever be appreciated.

For example, imagine one of your friends gives you this nicely wrapped package – with a pretty bow on it. They are so excited for you to open it. They tell you that they've put a lot of thought into this gift for you, and you open it up and ... it's deodorant!!

Now I'm guessing that even if it's the fancy spray kind of deodorant in your favorite scent... this gift is going to require some humility and honest personal reflection before your gratitude becomes sincere right? Because to receive that gift necessarily requires you to first accept the bad news that you have body odor...and your friend has been smelling it!

In fact, your friends might be more excited about the fact that you got deodorant than you at first, right? Because for you to really delight in receiving this gift of fancy smelling spray deodorant ... you must humbly face the truth that you weren't aware how bad you've been smelling all along.

It's like the unspoken hospitality command at church – never refuse a breath mint when offered one – because if they're offering it, you must need it!

Not all gifts are created equal. Some gifts require you to first accept bad news...before you ever can appreciate the good news of the gift. Some gifts require you to admit you're really messed up...before you can accept the gift and the fullness of joy it is intended to give.

And this is certainly the case with Christmas, right? Because Christmas isn't about tinsel and lights and trees and snow. Christmas is when we celebrate how God initiated the greatest rescue mission ever possible! Christmas is our celebration of God sending His own Son Jesus Christ to be born into human flesh ... so that He might become our eternal substitute – our Savior who rescues us from our sin.

But if you don't know that you're a lost sinner who is destined for eternal punishment in hell ...the gift of a Savior sent to rescue you isn't very thrilling. In fact, God sending you a Savior may be offensive to you.

Because to delight in the gift of Jesus the Savior, you must first own some bad news.

Before you can appreciate how good God's gift to you really is, you must be honest enough to look at your own life and see that you're a mess. You need help. The honest and humbling truth about you is this – you are a sinner. You continually fail to love God your Creator with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. You have not consistently loved others more than you truly love yourself.

But here's the good news... God has seen your sinful mess even more clearly than you have...and

### Main Point

God sovereignly uses our mess to fulfill His **saving** purposes.

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God sees our sin mess, and sends His Son to save and rescue us! God sees the mess of brokenness and suffering that you are enduring – some of it is your own sin, some of it is due to the sins of others – but God sees your whole messy can of worms ... and God enters that mess through Jesus the Messiah to save you!!

This is such good news – it causes humble hearts to come and adore our Savior!

So this morning as we walk through the first **seven verses of Luke 2**, we're going to take an honest look the human mess that God used... the mess that God entered in order to fulfill His saving purposes for you and for me.

God uses messy **global** circumstances to fulfill His saving purposes (2:1-3)

First, in **verses 1-3** we observe how God uses messy **global** circumstances to fulfill His saving purposes (2:1-3)

If you listen carefully, these opening verses of **Luke 2** paint a humbling picture of brokenness for God's people.

**Verse 1** starts with the phrase "In those days." In the nearest context, it's pointing back to **verse 80 of chapter 1**, or in the days of the birth of John the Baptist. But in the big picture, it's helpful to realize that these were days of

God uses messy **global** circumstances to fulfill His saving purposes (2:1-3)

- Prophetic **silence** (**400** years)

**Prophetic silence** for God's people. Before the angel Gabriel was sent to Zechariah and Mary in **Luke 1**, it had

been **400** long **years** since God had spoken to His Jewish people. On the world stage, the God's chosen people were in a mess of trouble in those days.

The prophet Malachi was the last prophet God had used to speak to His people – and his final words of the Old Testament recorded in **Malachi 4:5-6** were a warning of future judgment.

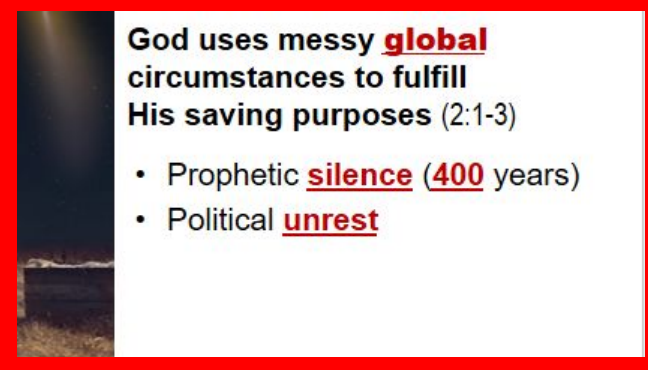
But before that judgment would come, **Malachi 3**<sup>1</sup> had promised that God would send his messenger to prepare the way for the coming Messiah.

Now 400 years after Malachi's lips became silent... the Jewish people were still waiting for the promised deliverer who would conquer Satan,<sup>2</sup> forgive their sin,<sup>3</sup> and give His Spirit to them.<sup>4</sup>

Just think about this. How patient are you? How many young children heard read in the Jewish Synagogues God's promise to send a Savior... only to grow up, and teach their children and grandchildren the same thing, and then die... still waiting on the promises to be fulfilled. And the next generation of grandchildren grew up believing the same promises ... teaching them to their children and grandchildren...only to die still waiting for God to move.

400 years is a long time isn't it? Our own country America is only 241 years old... so imagine the mess of

doubt and prevalent pessimism that must have hung like a cloud over the Jewish people of these days.



**God uses messy **global** circumstances to fulfill His saving purposes (2:1-3)**

- Prophetic **silence** (**400** years)
- Political **unrest**

Certainly, the **political unrest** of these days only added to the mess. By the time we get to **Luke 2** the Jewish people were under the control of the Roman empire, and the emperor was a powerful man by the name of Octavian who was the great-nephew of Julius Caesar.

After Julius Caesar was brutally murdered, Octavian joined with Mark Anthony and another Roman general named Lepidus and they ruled the entire Roman empire together in a 3-way dictatorship until Octavian deposed of Lepidus and then fought against Mark Anthony and his Egyptian lover Cleopatra until they both finally committed suicide – leaving Octavian as the sole ruler of the Roman Empire.

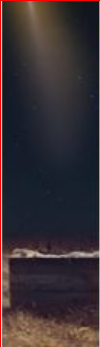
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<sup>1</sup> Malachi 3:1

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 3:15

<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 53:5-6

<sup>4</sup> Ezekiel 36:26-27ff



**God uses messy global circumstances to fulfill His saving purposes (2:1-3)**

- Prophetic silence (400 years)
- Political unrest
- Sinful leaders

Without a doubt the Jewish people in these days were under the rule of Sinful, power-hungry, greedy leaders.

In 27 BC The Roman Senate gave Octavian the esteemed title, “Augustus,” meaning the “honored” or “revered.” Caesar Augustus, as Octavian was thereafter called, ushered in an era of peace and prosperity for the Roman empire that lasted nearly 200 years.

But you know what that meant for the Jews living in modern day Israel? Caesar Augustus had appointed Herod the Great, a descendent of Esau, as his puppet king over all the Jews in Judea.<sup>5</sup> This meant that the descendants of Jacob were now under the sinful rule of Esau’s family. The Jewish priesthood was now politically motivated, and there was a spirit of liberalism and Greek thought that undercut the fear of the Lord in all positions of religious and civil influence among the Jews.

These were wicked days. And in those days, **Luke 2:1** says, Caesar Augustus issued a decree that all of the world should be registered. And since the Jews were

exempt from Roman military service, we know the purpose of this census was for taxation.

The place of the Jewish people on the global stage was a mess. God seemed silent. They were being ruled by arrogant dictators and sinners, who were quick to increase their tax burdens and thereby multiply their



**God uses messy global circumstances to fulfill His saving purposes (2:1-3)**

- Prophetic silence (400 years)
- Political unrest
- Sinful leaders
- Financial troubles

Financial troubles.

We know from world history that Quirinius was governor over Syria (which included modern day Israel) and led the census that is referenced in **Acts 5:37** in the year 6 AD. But the registration mentioned in **Luke 2** is the *first* census that Quirinius helped to administrate before he assumed the official role of governor after Herod’s death.

Obviously, this was a time of great financial pressure on the Jews. According to **verse 3**, no one was excluded. Every family had to be registered for taxation purposes. And probably in observance of Jewish customs, the Romans allowed the Jews to register themselves in the city of their own ancestral home.

<sup>5</sup> C.f. Matthew 2:1



If you're one of God's chosen people – these days were an absolute mess.

Can you relate at all with messy global circumstances? Do you ever look around, and listen to world news, and wonder why God seems so silent? Why is there so much unrest and turmoil among the nations? Why are leaders so immature and arrogant and wicked? And why are we laden with such financial trouble in these days?

Dear child of God – do not lose heart this morning. Though you may not always be able to see the sovereign moving of God's hand ... He is always working – using messy global circumstances to fulfill His saving purposes.

**Galatians 4:4** teaches us that God waited until the perfect time to send His Son to rescue us. The world-wide communication network of the Roman Empire was ripe and ready to spread the good news of Christ to all the nations! Even though Caesar Augustus didn't know it, God Himself was using his census to get Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem<sup>6</sup> – where He had promised hundreds of years earlier that the Messiah would be born.<sup>7</sup>

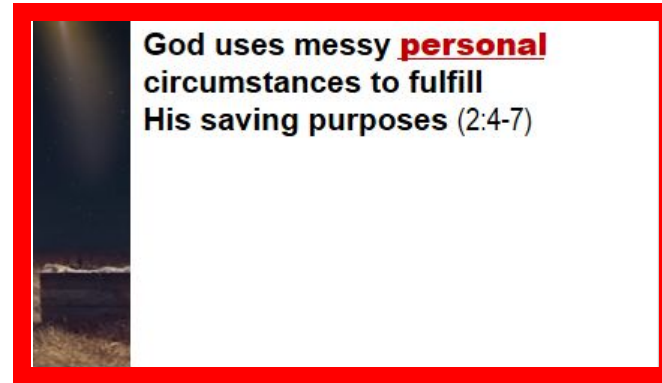
God's saving purposes are trustworthy. No global mess can thwart God's eternal plan for salvation of all those who trust in Him. Do you believe this morning that God can use the global mess of these days today for His greater glory and saving purposes in your life?

For **Luke 2** goes on to show us how,

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<sup>6</sup> Proverbs 21:1

<sup>7</sup> Micah 5:2



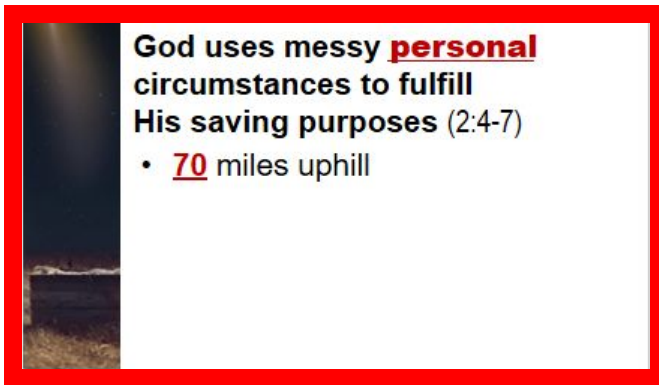
God uses messy personal circumstances to fulfill His saving purposes (2:4-7)

The text now narrows in on one special family who's living in the middle of this global mess...and Luke makes sure we get acquainted with their personal mess that God uses to fulfill His saving purposes as well.

**Verse 4** says that *Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth*

Galilee was a northern district of Israel around the Sea of Galilee – and one of its towns was Nazareth. And because Joseph was of the house and lineage of David, the Roman census required him to travel south into the region of Judea, past the capitol of Jerusalem to a very small village named Bethlehem just 7 miles south-west of Jerusalem.

Now you must understand – this wasn't just an afternoon trip. This unwanted financial reach of the Roman empire required Joseph to travel,



**70 miles uphill.**

That was the most direct route. If he wanted to avoid the region of Samaria, he'd have to add an additional 20 miles to the route.

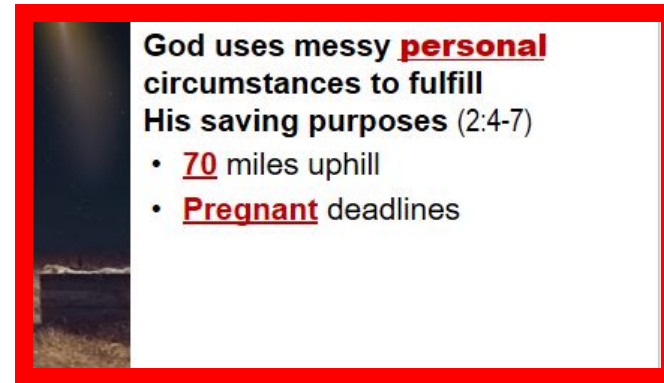
Notice too how **verse 4** says he went up from Galilee to Bethlehem, the city where David was born and raised. He was going south...but it was all uphill, because Bethlehem is a much higher elevation than the Sea of Galilee.

Can you imagine the hardship of this requirement? Joseph had a business to run. Responsibilities to fulfill. And then one day a courier announces this census... and places a deadline before which all heads of households must be registered, or be solely punished.

What a mess for Joseph. This trip was not easy, nor quick. And to make the situation even more messy, **verse 5** introduces us to the fact that Joseph was betrothed to Mary. **Matthew 1:24** calls Mary Joseph's wife... so likely they were already legally married at this time, just refrained from physically consummating their

physically until after Jesus was born, according to **Matthew 1:25**.

The end of **verse 5** makes it clear, the Roman registration requirements placed

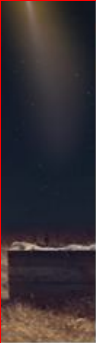


**Pregnant deadlines** upon Joseph and Mary. She was pregnant after all, and great with child.

Now if you're Joseph – what would you choose to do? Your new wife is about to have a very special baby – the angel Gabriel has told both you and Mary that this baby will be the promised Messiah – the Savior of the world!

I don't think you'd want to miss out on the birth! Certainly Mary doesn't want you to leave her behind for your long trip to Bethlehem...for all she faces back in Nazareth is,





God uses messy **personal** circumstances to fulfill His saving purposes (2:4-7)

- **70** miles uphill
- **Pregnant** deadlines
- Shameful **gossip**

### Shameful gossip.

Even though she's now married, all the people in Nazareth are still spreading rumors about how she became pregnant before her and Joseph were married.

Can you put yourself in the sandals of this very young Jewish couple? Would you agree that they were in the middle of a mess?

How many first-time moms who are near full-term would sign up for a 70 mile uphill trip – perhaps riding a camel or a donkey – perhaps walking alongside your husband – but certainly not in the comfort of an air-conditioned Uber chariot or wagon.

Perhaps as faithful Jews they were aware of the,



God uses messy **personal** circumstances to fulfill His saving purposes (2:4-7)

- **70** miles uphill
- **Pregnant** deadlines
- Shameful **gossip**
- **Prophetic** mandates

Prophetic mandates that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem? We don't know whether they went with excitement and joy to fulfill the prophecy of **Micah 5:2**, or whether God's promise to have the Messiah born in Bethlehem was out of sight and out of mind for them.

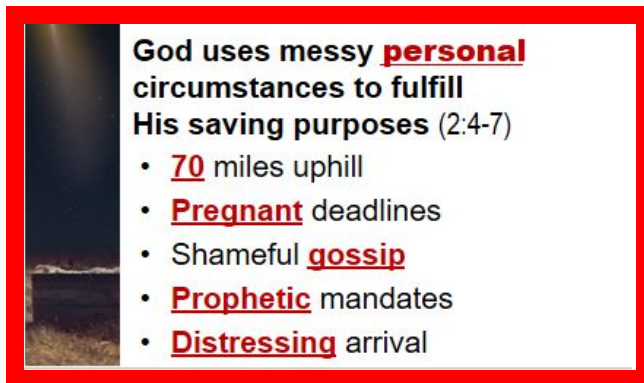
But either way – Joseph and Mary start out on their difficult and messy journey to Bethlehem...all in fulfillment of God's saving purposes for them.

Any of this seem painful and distressing to you? Do you ever feel like you can't catch a break in your own life? Like the deck of life's cards is stacked against you in some way?

Don't lose heart dear child of God. In Christ you are dearly loved more than you could ever imagine. God specializes in using messy personal circumstances to fulfill His saving purposes!

**Verse 6** makes it clear – they finally arrive and make the deadline, and Joseph gets registered and dutifully signs up to pay more taxes to Rome ... *and while they were there, the time came for Mary to give birth.*

This was likely a very



**Distressing arrival** for the first-time parents.

I've never experienced a woman giving birth to a child in a vehicle on the way to the hospital...but that's kind of the emotions that I get when I read this text.

This isn't how all the child-birth classes taught us it was all going to go, honey!

She's not at home in Nazareth – but they're in the middle of rural Bethlehem with no place yet to call home, no welcome by supportive family members. The end of **verse 7** describes some of this emotion, giving the reason why she had to lay baby Jesus down in an animal's feeding trough...*because there was no place for them at the inn.*

The word "inn" here is not the same word Luke uses in the parable of the good Samaritan in **Luke 10** for a motel. Instead this word refers to a guest room, or a campground, or a public shelter of some kind.

Remember Bethlehem was a very small village. The registration likely had brought a lot of visitors into town. Perhaps Joseph and Mary just found a quiet cave where people kept some animals, and used that place to painfully bring God into the world in human form.

We don't know the details of all this arrival...but this we do know: there was no crib. There was no royal robe for the new-born King. There was no welcome, and no fanfare.

Yes, in the verses to come we'll read about angels rejoicing and special visitors... but in that painful moment that Mary's baby decided to enter the world... it was a messy and distressing arrival.

Mary and Joseph must have wondered at the mess they were in. How was the trip back home to Galilee going to work with such a newborn baby? Where do they go now? What next?

We know from **Matthew 2** that they eventually settled down in a home in Bethlehem and stayed there for as long as 2 years before fleeing to Egypt to avoid Herod's murderous assassination attempt.<sup>8</sup>

More than likely this wasn't their original plan for how they would spend the first few years of their marriage together. But then again – most of us can testify from our own experiences that often our own lives are much more messy and chaotic from what we had planned out as well.

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<sup>8</sup> Matthew 2:16-18

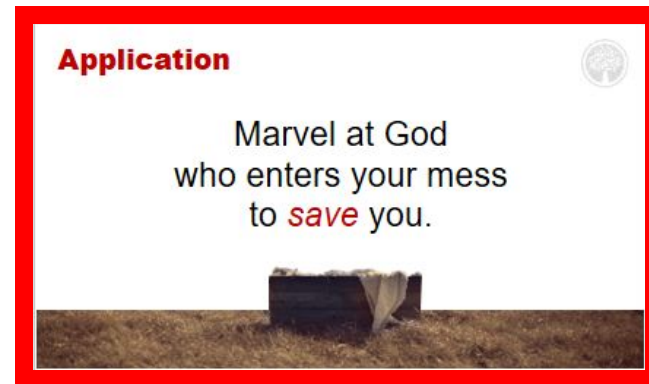
And the good news that I want you to see this morning is simply this,



God sovereignly uses our mess to fulfill His saving purposes.

Through all the humanness that we've considered in these **first 7 verses of Luke 2**, God has been sovereignly at work in it all. Yes, it's messy – even human sin is involved... but God never sins, and can never be held responsible for sin. All that God does is good and right.

But He's so powerful and holy that He brought forth His promised deliverer – Jesus the Son of God – without sin into the middle of global and personal mess – so that according to His eternal plan all who trust in Him would be forever saved!



So this Christmas, **Marvel at God who enters your mess to save you.**

No matter how challenging your circumstances may be... understand that God is still working in all of it to deliver you and draw you closer to Him.<sup>9</sup>

Stand amazed at the compassion and gentleness of a holy all-powerful God who loves you, and cares for you, and desires to draw near to you in real relationship – so that He can enter into the mess of your life and transform you from the inside out by His Spirit!

Listen – you don't need to clean up your life before you're good enough for God. Admit you're a mess. To receive the gift of salvation requires you to accept this bad news first. You are a sinner. You've made a mess out of your life, and you live in a world that is all a huge mess.

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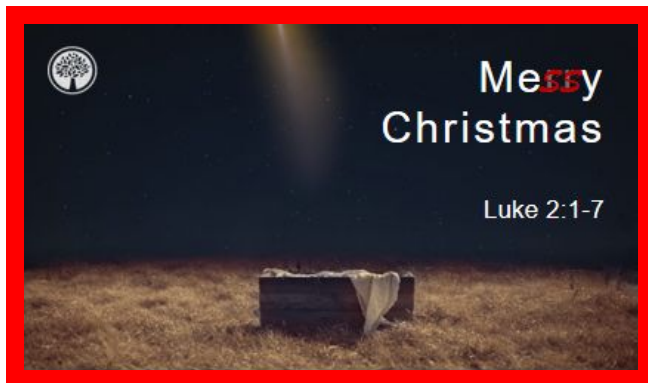
<sup>9</sup> Romans 8:28-29

But God keeps every one of the promises He's ever made. And all those who call on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ will be saved!<sup>10</sup>

So humble yourself and receive the amazing gift of eternal life by faith in Jesus Christ alone. Can you admit that you need a Savior, and your sin has been more obvious to God than you knew all along?

Repent and turn from your self-improvement efforts. Believe that Jesus came to be your substitute – and let Him do for you what you could never do for yourself.

God desires for you to be saved.<sup>11</sup> Surrender in the middle of your mess – come and marvel at our great God who alone is sufficient to enter your mess to rescue you forever.



**Let's Pray.**

<Angels We Have Heard on High>

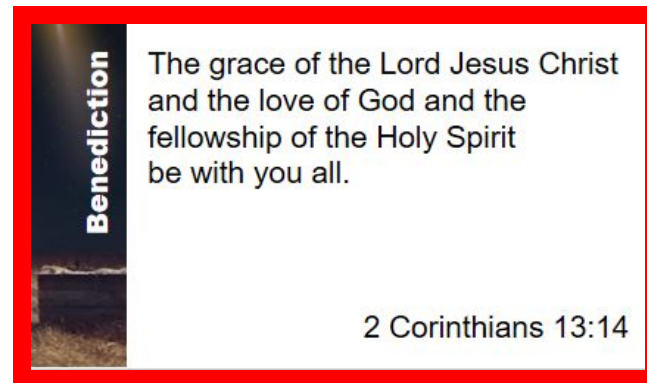
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<sup>10</sup> Romans 10:13

<sup>11</sup> 1 Timothy 2:4

Let's pray our Benediction now as we are dismissed,

### **Benediction**



*The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.*  
**2 Corinthians 13:14**



### **Recommended Resources on Messy Christmas:**

- Genesis 3:15
- Isaiah 7:14; 9:1-7; 40:3-5
- Jeremiah 31:15; 33:14-16
- Hosea 11:1
- Micah 5:2
- Malachi 3:1
- Matthew 1:18-25; 2:13-23
- John 1:14
- Romans 8:3-4
- 2 Corinthians 5:21
- Galatians 4:4-7
- Philippians 2:5-11
  
- <https://www.gty.org/christmas>
- <https://www.desiringgod.org/books/good-news-of-great-joy>
  
- *The Hope of Christmas*, Our Daily Bread Ministries
- *The Dawning of Indestructible Joy*, John Piper
- *Come Let Us Adore Him*, Paul David Tripp
- *Hidden Christmas*, Timothy Keller

### **Growing Deeper: Life Group Questions**

1. Review Luke 2:1-7. Why is our “familiarity” with the birth of Jesus so dangerous to our hearts each Christmas? How do you cultivate awe and wonder of Christ at Christmas?
2. What is your favorite Christmas Carol? Share why this one is your favorite, and then read the lyrics of the carol to each other. How do these lyrics agree or differ with the biblical account of Christ’s birth?
3. Read together one of the Old Testament prophecies above that refer to some aspect of Christ’s birth. How was this prophecy fulfilled? What does this teach us about God’s sovereign control over history, and our lives today?
4. Read John 1:14. How can you use the Christmas season to point others to Christ? Discuss ways with your biological family, your church family, and those who don’t know Christ.)
5. Read Philippians 2:6-7. Discuss why Christ’s incarnation (being made 100% human while still remaining 100% God) is so important for our salvation.