

CHRISTMAS INTERLUDE
God's Encouragements Amid Life's Oppressions, Luke 2:1-20
II. God's Edification Amid Personal Hardships
(Luke 2:5-19)

Introduction: (To show the need . . .)

Many people struggle with depression at Christmas, for if they try to focus on what makes them happy, they only note their lack of joy due to oppression. One realm of trial is that of personal hardships, and we illustrate:

(1) "New research" by "Harvard public health professors . . . of the Bipartisan Policy Center in Washington, D. C." has established "that after decades of living longer and longer lives, Americans are dying earlier . . . by drug overdoses, suicides and diseases . . . linked to social and economic privation, a health care system with glaring gaps and blind spots, and profound psychological distress." (Melissa Healy of the Los Angeles Times, "U. S. life expectancy continues to drop," Republican-American, November 27, 2019, p. 10A) The "U. S. epidemic of so-called 'deaths of despair' (long thought to be a phenomenon limited to rural white America" has "gained ground in the nation's suburbs" and is "making inroads into black and brown populations." (Ibid.)

(2) Many college and university students in our state are plagued by stress: Janet Spotlore, director of student counseling and health services at Connecticut College, recently said, "'You talk to any of the private colleges or the state [universities] right at this particular moment, they are absolutely swamped in terms of seeing students'" with mental health issues. (Kathleen Megan, "Mental health disparity," Ibid., December 10, 2019, p. 1A)

Need: So we ask, "What edification does God offer for the personal hardships we face this Christmas Season?!"

I. In her move to Bethlehem, Mary was plagued by a variety of personal hardships, Luke 2:5-7:

- A. Mary faced wounded personal relationships with associates in Nazareth that spurred her to want to relocate:
 1. Luke 2:5 reports that Mary as Joseph's "betrothed" wife (*mnesteuo*, Arndt & Gingrich, A Grk.-Eng. Lex. of the N. T., 1967, p. 527) went with him from Nazareth to Bethlehem, and that she was **then also** "pregnant" (*egkuos*, Ibid., p. 216), meaning she had become pregnant out of wedlock!
 2. Matthew 1:18-19 reports that when Joseph learned Mary was pregnant, knowing he was not her baby's father, he thought of divorcing her, what was needed in his day to break the betrothal. Only after God's angel told him of God's cause of her pregnancy did Joseph take Mary to be his wife, Matthew 1:20-25.
 3. Yet, associates who did not believe God had caused her pregnancy would view Mary as immoral, spurring her to relocate to Bethlehem. (A. Edersheim, The Life and Times of Jesus the Mes., 1972, vol. i, p. 183)
- B. Mary faced physical and mental duress in her pregnant condition and delivery:
 1. The journey by foot, donkey or wooden cart from Nazareth to Bethlehem through the Jordan River valley took at least 3 days (Ibid., p. 184), and it was winter, with often wet weather with resulting muddy roads and low temperatures at night in the Jordan valley area. (Zon. Pict. Ency. Bib., vol. Four, p. 577-580)
 2. Mary was near her delivery date seen in her need to give birth in a stable as there was no room for them in the Bethlehem inn, or "kahn," a walled courtyard with roofed but open stalls and a well for visitors. (Ibid., vol. Three, p. 280; Ibid., Edersheim, p. 185; Luke 2:7) The trip itself may have induced labor for Mary, making her arrival and Joseph's search for housing in the town a hurried, crisis event for the couple!
 3. Micah 5:2-3 ESV, NIV predicted Messiah's mother would experience "labor" in bearing Him (Ryrie Study Bible, KJV, 1978, ftn. to Micah 5:3), so Mary was a sinner under the Adamic curse (Genesis 3:16) opposite Roman Catholic belief in her "Immaculate Conception" (Lorraine Boettner, Rom. Cath., 1978, p. 158), what also indicates Mary's labor with this her "firstborn son" (*prototokon*, U. B. S. Grk. N. T., 1966, p. 207) was likely long and intense as often occurs with a woman's firstborn child, Luke 2:7, 16.
 4. Since Mary herself wrapped her baby in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger and since the shepherds found her with Joseph and her baby implies no one else was there, that Mary lacked a midwife to help her. That was a physical and mental hardship for a young Mary with no previous childbirth experience.
 5. The birth in a stable with its elevated bacteria count was a health threat for Mary and her infant, Luke 2:7.
- C. Mary faced emotional duress in her pregnant condition and delivery:
 1. The Roman census that required Mary to go with Joseph to a Bethlehem crowded with strangers who had flocked there for the census isolated her from known supportive female companions in her time of need.
 2. Mary also faced the dishonor of having no family in the inn (kahn) that was willing to give up even their open stall living quarters for her to deliver her baby in any place but a stable for animals, Luke 2:7.

II. However, God sovereignly USED these hardships to give Mary memories she would treasure for life:

- A. When God's angel announced Jesus' birth to the Bethlehem shepherds, he gave a "sign," (*semeion*, U. B. S. Grk. N. T., 1966, p. 207), better, a "distinguishing mark" (Ibid., Arndt & Gingrich, p. 755-756) that was "unto you," meaning it was **specifically** meant for the **Bethlehem shepherds**, Luke 2:12 KJV.
- B. That "distinguishing mark" was that the infant would be wrapped in strips of cloth and lying in the unusual bed of a **manger**, and these men via their profession would know about every **manger** in the Bethlehem area!
- C. They thus hurriedly made the trip and easily found Mary, Joseph and the infant Jesus lying in the manger just as the angel had said (Luke 2:15-16, 20), and they informed Mary and Joseph of the appearance and great and joyful message of the angels to them about Jesus being both Messiah and Lord (Luke 2:11-14).
- D. However, **ONLY** the **combination of personal hardships** Mary faced in her relocation from Nazareth to Bethlehem, her physical and emotional duress of the trip, the housing and circumstances of the delivery led to the **manger** being the "distinguishing mark" the shepherds would use to find the Infant Messiah and Lord with Mary and Joseph, and relay the news of the angels to them about Jesus being Messiah and God!
- E. So, by way of the **manger**, God gave Mary memories of Jesus' birth that she would treasure for life, Lk. 2:19!

Lesson: *God utilized Mary's personal hardships that led to her using a manger along with the angels' appearances and message to the Bethlehem shepherds to give her memories about Christ's birth that she would treasure for life.*

Application: (1) *May we trust in Christ for salvation, John 3:16.* (2) *If facing personal hardships this Christmas, may we rely on the Lord to work through even the hardships to display His edifying mercy unto us.*

Conclusion: (To illustrate the message . . .)

Each personal hardship noted in our introduction is addressed by God under special conditions in Scripture, so God may allow one to face such hardships to point him to God's edifying solutions to them in His Word. We explain:

(1) On drug and alcohol abuse and suicide, what people use to escape pain and anxiety, Ephesians 5:18 directs that instead of being controlled by wine, we should be "filled" with or controlled by the Holy Spirit. One obtains the Holy Spirit by faith in Christ for salvation (Romans 8:9b) and by depending on the Holy Spirit, he experiences the Spirit's love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23 ESV), the balm needed by those who face overwhelming pain and anxiety.

(2) On social deprivation, (a) Jesus promised in John 14:21-23 that for the believer who obeys His Word, God the Father and Christ Himself would make their abode with him in his personal life. (b) Then, as the believer interacts with other godly believers, he enjoys fellowship with them, 1 John 1:1-7; Hebrews 10:25.

(3) On economic deprivation, (a) God in Hebrews 13:5-6 directs believers to be content with their current possessions and to trust Him to meet their material needs, and (b) 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12 directs believers to make it their ambition in life to lead a quiet life, to mind their own affairs and to work with their own hands in order to present a good testimony of their walk with God before the world and not to be in any material need.

(4) On a problematic health care system, we can minimize our need of it by heeding (a) 1 Timothy 5:23 where Paul told Timothy medicinally to use a little wine in his drinking water to purify it of bacteria, thus to watch out for his own physical welfare to avoid needless health problems. (b) Similarly, other reasonable moves are avoiding **known** problem practices or foods (like tobacco use, ingesting processed and/or high sugar foods, etc.) that through extensive use lead to serious physical problems and rather using good practices and ingesting good foods.

(5) On psychological distress, "deaths of despair" and many college and university students seeking their schools' mental health services, (a) psychological tests have found that believers in Christ who daily read and heed Scripture experience "no significant pathology," no sizeable psychological problems. (Frank B. Minirth, M. D., You Can Measure Your Mental Health, 1980, p. 14) (b) Some samples of how this works: (i) Psalm 119:17-27 teaches the use of Scripture to handle verbal attacks; (ii) Psalm 119:25-32 teaches handling depression by Scripture; (iii) Psalm 119:49-56 teaches how to respond to scorners who replace Scripture with their own authority; (iv) Psalm 119:81-88 teaches handling prolonged, draining trials via Scripture; (v) Psalm 119:105-112 teaches the Biblical management of overwhelming crises; (vi) Psalm 119:145-152 teaches the use of Scripture to handle insomnia caused by a burdened heart; (vii) Psalm 119:153-160 teaches Scripture's help for those in conflict with oppressive, evil foes; (viii) Psalm 119:161-168 teaches Scripture's use in handling the fear of harmful people and (ix) Psalm 119:169-176 teaches victory over deception via Scripture. (See our web site for all 22 lessons from Psalm 119 on Scripture's edifying use.)

May we trust in Christ for salvation. If facing personal hardships this Christmas, may we rely on the Lord, being careful to obey His Word in our lives, and see Him work through even our hardships to help us.