

CHRISTMAS INTERLUDE

Relating Rightly To Relatives At Christmas

Part IV. Functioning With God's Blessing When Separated From Relatives

(Luke 2:1-20)

Introduction: (To show the need . . .)

Christmas is a time when one usually gathers with his relatives for celebration, but circumstances can arise that produce painful separation from one's relatives even at Christmas:

(1) The "Dear Annie" column in the December 16, 2016 issue of the Republican-American, p. 3D posted a letter by a woman who had experienced painful separation from her sister over the recent presidential election. She wrote: "Before the campaign . . . we talked . . . at least three times a week. Now we haven't talked in two weeks . . ."

Annie replied, "Based on what I've heard from other readers, the disagreement you and your sister are having is happening at tables all across the nation." (Ibid.)

(2) We face separation from relatives this Christmas at the local level: in the last two weeks, three different members of our Church independently of one another have told me of separation between relatives they know due to religious beliefs, family dysfunction or personality conflicts, or combinations of such factors.

(3) Sometimes the separation is not an alienation in terms of relationship, but in regards to geographical location: many people at Christmas are parted from relatives overseas in the military or from relatives in faraway states of the nation or even in faraway parts of the world.

Need: *So, we ask, "How may I function well this Christmas if I am separated in some way from my relatives?!"*

- I. **When Mary gave birth to Jesus in Bethlehem, she was separated from supportive relatives, Luke 2:1-7:**
 - A. Similar to what occurs today, when a woman gave birth in Israel in Mary's time, supportive women kinfolk and friends would gather around her to help and to rejoice with her as in the case of Elisabeth in Luke 1:57-58.
 - B. This explains why Mary rushed from Galilee down to Judea to meet her relative Elisabeth upon learning of her pregnancy in concert with Mary's own supernatural pregnancy with the Messiah, Luke 1:35-47.
 - C. However, when Mary gave birth to Jesus, she was alienated from all her supportive women kinfolk, Lk. 2:1-7:
 1. Joseph took his espoused wife Mary to Bethlehem in Judah for a census decreed by Caesar, for Roman law required they claim their family estates for tax assessments, and since a Jew's property was that of his father's estate, both Joseph and Mary with many other Hebrews had to go to Bethlehem since they were of the house and lineage of David, Luke 2:1-4. (H. Hoehner, Chron. Asps. of the Life of Christ, 1979, p. 15)
 2. The trip itself was a hardship even for that era: it involved several days of travel over 60 miles in the cold, rainy latter part of December, and Mary was close to delivering her firstborn child, Luke 2:5. (Ibid., p. 25-27; The MacMillan Bible Atlas, 1968, Map 225; Zon. Pict. Ency. Bib., v. One, p. 688)
 3. Upon finally arriving in Bethlehem, the couple soon ran into a housing crisis even for their era, Lk. 2:6-7:
 - a. The complete lack of housing described in Luke 2:7b meant that Joseph and Mary arrived with the town already swarming with people who had come for the census, and some scholars claim Joseph and Mary first tried to stay with relatives in view of Mary's imminent delivery date (bible.org/net bible/, Luke 2:7).
 - b. However, with so many of the same lineage of David having already arrived, either the relatives' guest room was already full of other relatives or there was no more room in the khan, or "inn," a crude shelter for travelers in the town that had a roof and rooms each composed of three walls that were thus open to the outside world (Ibid.; Alfred Edersheim, The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah, 1972, i, p. 184-185).
 - c. Mary's relative Elisabeth lived in the nearby hill country of Judah (Luke 1:39), but she was either not aware of or not able to house Mary at the time, and since Mary then went into labor, she gave birth in a cave stable and wrapped her newborn son in strips of cloth and laid Him in a manger, Luke 2:6-7; Ibid.
 4. Thus, Israel's Messiah was born in a stable and laid in a manger, what no Jew would want (Ibid., p. 186), and His mother had no typically supportive women present to edify her during such a momentous event!
- II. **Yet, as Mary and Joseph heeded God's will, He greatly encouraged them and outcast shepherds, 2:8-20:**
 - A. Joseph and Mary had heeded the Roman Law requiring them to make the arduous trip to Bethlehem (Luke 2:1-4), and Romans 13:3-7 directs that believers heed such rulers.
 - B. Also, the Jews knew the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem according to Micah 5:2 (cf. Matthew 2:4-6), and Joseph and Mary had both been told by an angel of God that she was about to deliver the Messiah (cf. Luke 1:30-33; Matthew 1:20-21), so they likely went to Bethlehem also to heed Scripture, Ibid., Hoehner.

- C. John 14:23 claims that if a believer loves God he will also obey Him, and that the Lord will then interact with him to bless and encourage him in his life, precisely what occurred for Mary and Joseph (as follows):
1. The rabbis in that era held that when Messiah was born, His birth would be announced from Migdol Eder, "the tower of the flock" located north of Bethlehem on the road from that town to Jerusalem, Ibid.
 2. The flocks kept near this tower were destined for the Jerusalem Temple sacrifices, so the shepherds who kept them missed required Temple meetings and were unfairly banned from the Temple, Ibid., p. 186-187.
 3. However, God did not send His angel to herald Jesus' birth from the top of Migdol Eder in keeping with Rabbinic tradition, but down on the ground to outcast shepherds so that not only they, but all Israel might know that Messiah had been born for **all of them**, Luke 2:8-11. God thus modified Rabbinic tradition to emphasize His **GRACE** to **ALL** of Israel's people -- to the **lowly** in **along with** the **rest of Israel's people!**
 4. God's angel informed the outcast shepherds that the sign that Messiah was for **all** of the people would be their finding the infant Messiah wrapped in strips of cloth, lying in a lowly manger, Luke 2:12.
 5. Then, suddenly joining this angel was a multitude of the heavenly host of God's angels, declaring praise to God in the highest and peace on earth to men upon whom God's favor graciously rests, Luke 2:13-14 NIV.
 6. Deeply moved by the angels' joyful announcement, the shepherds hurriedly left their sheep and headed for Bethlehem where they found Mary, Joseph and the baby who was indeed lying in a manger, Luke 2:15-16.
 7. Filled with joy, these lowly, outcast shepherds became great heralds of Messiah's birth, making known abroad the angelic announcement concerning Messiah Jesus, Luke 2:17, and all who heard them marveled at the things the shepherds told them, Luke 2:18. Just like people were shocked and marveled at events surrounding the birth and the naming of John in Luke 1:63-66a, God arranged for the same countryside and town of Bethlehem to be moved at the message of these outcast shepherds about His Son's birth!
 8. These events greatly edified those in the account who were parted from others in hardship, Luke 2:19-20:
 - a. Mary **was continually** (imperfect tense) **treasuring** (*suneterei*, U. B. S. Grk. N. T., 1966, p. 208; The Analy. Grk. Lex., 1972, p. 389; Arndt & Gingrich, A Grk.-Eng. Lex. of the N. T., 1967, p. 800) the memory of these events so that she **kept on pondering** (present tense, *sumballousa*, Ibid., U. B. S. Grk. N. T.; Ibid, The Analy. Grk. Lex., p. 382; Ibid., Arndt & Gingrich, p. 785) them all through her earthly life!
 - b. The outcast shepherds returned to their flocks, glorifying and praising God for all of the things they had heard and seen of the angels and the baby in the manger, just as it had been told to them! (Luke 2:20)

Lesson: *Though separated from supportive relatives at the time of delivering her firstborn son through the hardship of a Roman census that required their sixty-mile journey in terrible December weather only to have to give birth in a cave stable and lay her baby in a lowly manger, since Mary with her husband Joseph had HEEDED God's will in making the trip to Bethlehem, GOD sent His angels to supply great joy and wonderful memories of Jesus' birth as well as greatly encouraging the lowly, unfairly outcast shepherds of Migdol Eder.*

Application: *If we face a painful relational or geographical separation from relatives this Christmas, (1) may we trust in Christ for salvation from sin and come under God's "much more" care, John 3:16; Rom. 8:32. (2) Then, may we (a) heed God's will that is clarified for us in Scripture, (b) leaving the nurture of our inner man for God to address like He did for Mary, Joseph and the outcast shepherds that first Christmas!*

Conclusion: (To illustrate the message . . .)

(1) Last Sunday after our Worship Service, a long-time Church member told me of his early days here at Nepaug Church. He had realized through our teaching of Scripture that we were giving the truth, so he had accepted it even if it cost him relationships with his relatives. He said, "Believing what was taught here required me to throw off my entire past religious heritage at great cost in my relationships with some relatives, but the price was worth it!"

(2) Then, after I had finished writing up the first draft of these sermon notes Wednesday afternoon, another Church member spoke with me Wednesday night after Prayer Meeting, testifying how the Lord had encouraged her amid geographical separation she has faced for nine years from a relative who is halfway around the world!

(3) I later realized that through both of these testimonials, God was signaling to me that He had been at work to encourage both members just as He had encouraged Mary, Joseph and the outcast shepherds that first Christmas when they were separated from others or from their relatives either relationally or geographically! My part was then to share these testimonials in the concluding illustration of today's Christmas Sunday sermon.

May we trust in Christ to be saved. Then, if we are separated either in relationship or geographically from relatives this Christmas, may we heed God's will and see Him provide all the encouragement we need!