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—LUKE 2:1–20—

DAY

1

Swaddling Clothes for a King

For much of the twentieth century in Western society, giving birth was viewed as little more than a medical “procedure.” Hospitals. Doctors. Nurses. For a time hospitals wouldn’t even allow fathers to be present at birth.

Thankfully, the harsher, clinical atmosphere has softened, and we’re again recognizing the birth process as a normal part of life. Birthing rooms in some hospitals offer warm colors; older siblings are sometimes invited to visit, and Mom and Dad can spend some time alone with the newborn in the almost-like-home setting.

When Jesus was born, things were much different. No hospitals. No doctors. No nurses. The Gospel of Luke,

written by a medical doctor, describes the event in a simple, natural way. Joseph and Mary had traveled from Nazareth to Bethlehem to register for the required Roman census. “While they were there, the days were completed for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son; and she wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn” (Luke 2:6–7).

Who helped Mary with the delivery? We’re not told, but it’s reasonable to assume a midwife or some older women from the town assisted the mother-to-be. Every village must have had a group of wise, experienced women who helped young mothers through the process of delivery. Since both Mary and Joseph traced their family lines back to David, it’s reasonable to assume the women of Bethlehem would come to the aid of these out-of-town relatives. There may have been no space available to house the young couple, but these women must surely have had room in their hearts to show compassion to a young woman going through labor and delivery for the first time.

If Joseph followed the custom of the day, he was outside waiting anxiously for news about the condition of his wife and child. Perhaps some of the men from the town were also gathered with him, offering words of encouragement and advice. “I’m sure everything will be fine. Perhaps the child will even be a son!” one might have said,

unaware that Joseph already knew the sex of this unborn child! (See Matthew 1:18–21.)

After giving birth, Mary wrapped her newborn son in “cloths,” or, as you might remember from the King James Version of the Bible, “swaddling clothes” (Luke 2:7). But why would Mary wrap her son in strips of cloth bound tightly around His body?

Some ancient writers saw the swaddling clothes as a picture of the divine nature being concealed, swaddled as it were, in human flesh. Others saw a typological relationship between Jesus being wrapped in cloths and placed in a manger as a baby and later being “wrapped in a linen cloth” and laid “in a tomb cut into the rock” following His crucifixion (see Luke 23:53).

But could there be a simpler explanation?

In ancient times the wrapping of a child in strips of cloth was a sign of the parents’ loving reception of their child. In the Middle East a newborn was bathed in warm salt water and then wrapped in strips of soft, warm fabric. How do we know this? Two Old Testament passages give us insight into these practices.

The first is from the Book of Job. Toward the end of the book God confronted Job and asked Job to explain how God created the world. “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? . . . Or who enclosed the sea with doors when, bursting forth, it went out from the

womb; when I made a cloud its garment, *and thick darkness its swaddling band?*” (Job 38:4–9, italics added).

God describes the “birth” of the world, and He pictures the dark clouds swirling around the planet as the strips of cloth He wrapped around this new creation.

If the Book of Job pictures God blessing His new creation by wrapping it in swaddling cloths, the prophet Ezekiel uses the imagery to picture a far sadder scene. He describes the history of the city of Jerusalem as the story of God’s compassion toward an unwanted child. The city’s origins gave no hint as to its future greatness as Israel’s capital and the site of God’s holy temple. He writes, “As for your birth, on the day you were born your navel cord was not cut, nor were you washed with water for cleansing; you were not rubbed with salt *or even wrapped in cloths*” (Ezekiel 16:4, italics added).

As an “unwanted child,” Jerusalem was neglected and uncared for until God showered His grace on her. But note carefully that wrapping the child in swaddling cloths was part of the normal care and love one would expect at a child’s birth.

If all newborns were wrapped in swaddling cloths, in what sense was the wrapping of Jesus in such cloths symbolic? Remember, when the angels appeared to the shepherds, they gave them a sign. “For today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ

the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger” (Luke 2:11–12).

The key here is to note that the swaddling cloths by themselves are *not* the sign. The shepherds would find the child wrapped in swaddling cloths *and* lying in a manger. The likelihood of both events happening randomly was extremely remote. A toddler could conceivably climb into a feeding trough, but a child wrapped tightly in swaddling bands (as a newborn would be) could only be placed there deliberately. And what mother would place her newborn into the equivalent of a barnyard feeding trough? That’s



A stone manger, or feeding trough, from Megiddo

how the shepherds would know they had found *the* child.

A newborn king—even the Jewish Messiah—wrapped in swaddling cloths? That wouldn't be unusual. The cut of the cloth and style of fabric might have differed, but whether the newborn child was the son of a prince or a pauper, one would expect to find him swaddled.

But a newborn child—especially a king—being deliberately placed in a manger, a common feeding trough for animals? That certainly made it easy for these shepherds to search through the village until they found the child whose birth had just been announced. And yet, I wonder what was going through their minds as they started on their scavenger hunt, searching for the King of the Jews in a barnyard manger.

In many ways things haven't changed. People today still struggle to accept Jesus as the Messiah, or as the Son of God, or as their personal Savior, because He doesn't match their preconceived ideas. But God asks us, just as the angels did the shepherds, to look beyond expectations and focus on the facts. One doesn't expect to find a newborn king in a manger, but this one was. That was the sign. And one doesn't expect God's Son, the Messiah, to die on a cross, but this one did . . . to pay the price for our sins.

And maybe that's what makes Jesus Himself such an amazing gift from God. "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in

Him shall not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

DO YOU HAVE A PERSONAL

relationship with the Jesus of the Bible? Do you know the One who was born in Bethlehem, who died on a cross in Jerusalem to pay the penalty for your sin, who rose from a borrowed tomb three days later, who ascended to heaven, and who is coming back again? If not, why not begin your thirty-day journey of discovery by coming to know this one about whom God said, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased” (Matthew 3:17)?

Read through the Gospel of Luke to learn what God says about this one called Jesus. And perhaps, like those shepherds so long ago, you will find yourself “glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen, just as had been told them” (Luke 2:20).