

## **GOD GUIDES ORDINARY PEOPLE**

**Luke 2:1–7**

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God guides ordinary people. Normally, this passage of Scripture is only preached at Christmas time. Certainly, that's my own experience of having preached from it—it has been, in respect to the Christmas story. Perhaps your only occasion for hearing a message from Luke 2:1–7 has been during the Christmas time. I found, however, that by focusing on this text out of season—after all, it's only two weeks before All Saints Day (I hate to say the word “Halloween”, I'd rather say “All Saints Day”), it's out of season. But by being out of season, perhaps we can focus on this Scripture with a fresh perspective and see some things in this passage we normally don't see because we're so anxious to get to the centrality of the Christmas story itself.

All of us are concerned about direction in life. This passage of Scripture tells us a great deal about how God directs ordinary people. Maybe you're here today and you feel like you've lost direction. Sometimes, losing direction is akin to the sense of being lost in a forest and you don't know which path to take to get out. Or if you're a child, being lost in a big supermarket and not knowing where the exits are or where the parents are. It's a frightening thing in life to be lost. Sometimes, as we get to be adults and begin to lose our sense of direction, the fright goes away, but it is transformed into something that might be simply called a quiet despair. We're not outwardly, evidently panicked but inside, there is that spirit of disquiet. A sense of, “I wonder what I was begun for when I am so soon done for.”

So we come, in this Scripture, to these two ordinary people. I mean no disrespect in calling Mary and Joseph ordinary. True, they have extraordinary advantage of life given to them in that they would serve as earthly parents to Jesus. But in other respects, they're ordinary. And I think

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they're truly representative of, if you will, every man and every woman. In this passage which we have read from Luke, we find them having God's leadership in their life at a time when God is not speaking to them in any supernatural way. Through these seven verses, you will find that there is no mention of an angel giving directions. There is no mention of being led by dreams. There is no voice speaking to them. Unlike the wise men, they have no star to guide them. And they have no miracle of sustenance, no miracle to provide food or water for them and no miracle to open special Holiday Inn accommodations in Bethlehem when they get there. They are left flat out, so to speak, on their own resources, without any seeming divine supernatural intervention, on that journey that started in Galilee and Nazareth and winded its way 80-100 miles to the south, down to Bethlehem. The difference in the amount of miles would depend upon the particular road that they may have taken.

It's interesting how God works with His people. He sent the angel Gabriel to announce to Mary that she was to bear the Christ. But I'm sure that there were moments Mary wished that He would send the angel Gabriel to the town's square in Nazareth to announce how it was that she had become expectant with child, to put to stop all the wagging tongues at Nazareth. But God did not provide His angel Gabriel on that task. Many times, we wish that God would get more with it when we need Him to give us a defense against things that happen to us; when it seems like often we think He should come to our aid, He is nowhere to be found. How does God guide us in those times?

Mary, although being a Christ bearer, is like us—terribly vulnerable. She and Joseph model what it is like for the people of God to go through a time of seeming abandonment. Our problem with life is often simply one of perspective. We want to look at the segments of life we're going through with a microscope. And if we try to examine them with a microscope, to make sense out

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of them, we don't yield any sense. Mary cannot perhaps understand why is it that we have to leave Nazareth, our family and home, at a time like this. Why is it that things weren't prepared in Bethlehem for us? Why the manger? Why this difficult trip in the ninth month of pregnancy, on a donkey, all that way down and climbing those three thousand feet back up out of the Dead Sea area into the Jerusalem area. Why? Why? Why?

If you take each one of those segments and put a microscope on them and try to examine and make sense out of them, they don't appear to yield anything. It's only when you get the telescope out and see all the segments together in one canopy, one design, one fantastic expanse that you begin to sense, "Oh, there's design to that! There's meaning to that! There's purpose to that!" It's the same way with our lives. We often get stuck because we so singly focus in microscopically on the particular moment of life we're in, that we fail to get out the telescope and see perhaps the larger design emerging.

Chapter two sort of gives us the telescopic picture of God guiding these ordinary people. There are four things that can be said about God's guidance of ordinary people.

#### **I. The first is, God is in control even when it doesn't seem that way.**

The tip-off to that statement being true is found in the opening words of Luke 2, "In those days, Caesar Augustus issued a decree." What in the world put it in the head of Caesar Augustus to issue a decree that would ultimately result in a cause-and-effect relationship—that somewhere in the outer, eastern parts of his empire, in a little town that he knew nothing of and did not even know its name, a town we know as Nazareth, a carpenter would be motivated to leave his tools and shop and go with his nine-month expectant wife down to a city in the south called Bethlehem? Strange. If you were to say to him, "Because you're issuing this decree, you are positioning the Messiah, the King of all the world, to be born in his prophesied birthplace. Six

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centuries before the prophet Micah said, ‘In Bethlehem he would be born.’ Caesar, God is using you in setting out that decree.” It would have blown his mind. But somebody got inside Caesar’s head, and that’s the point of Luke’s telling the story, that Caesar just doesn’t do whatever Caesar wants to do. Caesar does what God wants him to do. At that particular moment, God wanted Caesar to issue a decree so that, in a non-miraculous way, He could get Joseph out of Nazareth, down to Bethlehem, where he should be in order to fulfill the prophecy. The point of the New Testament, by the way—as you go through this whole development of the New Testament and see how the early Christians interacted with the Caesars, Augustus Caesar is the first Caesar mentioned in the New Testament, he is Octavian; he is the grand-nephew of Julius Caesar, the successor of Julius Caesar, who at the young age of thirty-three came in as the Emperor in 30 B.C. and reigned for forty-four years, dying in 14 A.D., as a seventy-seven-year-old man. It was said of him that, when he came in as emperor, he found Rome “brick” and, when he died, he had left Rome “marble.” He transformed the city. He had a tremendous administration. He was a builder of roads, a builder of organization, a builder of civilization. Yet this one moment in his life, God interacts with him and says, “Issue a decree.” And the thought is put there, and Caesar cannot even claim originality for it. He is being used to suit God’s purposes.

The early Christians knew that God could have done something to get Mary down to Bethlehem in a more spectacular way. He didn’t have to work through this indirect means of a decree from Caesar. We know that God could have sent a helicopter to get Mary out of Nazareth down to Bethlehem, jetted her down there in just a few moments’ time. He didn’t have to wait for the invention of the helicopter. God was aware that, in time and space, such an invention would emerge and He could have sent it out of one of his livery stables in heaven, next to where they keep the horses. He could have had a helicopter fleet come down. But He didn’t use a helicopter

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or any other mechanism. The early Christians knew that God was the real power behind Caesar Augustus. He was the real power behind the Caesar under which Christ was born. He was the real power when Tiberius Caesar was reigning and Christ died. Under Caesar Nero, God was still there with power when Paul was appearing in trial before Caesar Nero and Caesar Nero had begun the first persecution of the Christians. And when the New Testament canon is being brought to a close at the end of the first century, and Domitian Caesar is on the throne, smashing his way through the hopes and dreams and lives of the Church, it is still the Lord God omnipotent reigning.

God is in control of life. We, as Christians, know this about God. We know that, if God does not act, it is not because He is helpless or because He is unaware or unmoved. But out of His own councils, He chooses not to act, because He chooses not to. And when He acts, sometimes what He does is so small that we do not initially even see it.

One of the older theologians, Isaac Williamson, in a little book called *The Nativity* puts it in this classical language, speaking of the birth of Christ being a time in which great things are happening but few things are being noticed. “The unfashionable depths of the divine counsels were moved. The fountains of the great deep were broken up. The healing of the nations was issuing forth. Nothing was seen on the surface of human society but the slight rippling of the water.” All this was going on but nothing was seen except a slight rippling of the water.

God’s purpose in His quiet activity was to bring in His internal reign. And the reason He does not work in more extraordinary fashion with Mary and Joseph, and with you and me, is that in the age to come there will be a manifestation of His external reign and control over all things, but now we walk by faith. As the hymn writer has said, “This is my Father’s world, O let me here

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forget that though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet.” That’s what we Christians say as we come to this passage.

For Mary and Joseph, and for our own lives, God is in control. Even if everything seems out of control to me, I stand back and confess and know my God knows and is in control.

**II. The second truth that emerges about God’s leading of us ordinary people is that God, when He leads us, often leads us indirectly.**

This truth flows out of the first one. God’s in control, but He leads us so often indirectly. The census was a means of indirect leadership. It was that ticking, timing mechanism that motivated Joseph and Mary to get out of Nazareth and get down to Joseph’s ancestral home of Bethlehem to be registered. I’ve wondered, as I’ve looked at this story, why they waited so long. I wonder if one of the reasons why they waited so long to make the move was because Mary and Joseph had both had experiences, up to this point, in which they had been led by God in a particular way. I wonder if they weren’t waiting for God to lead them again the same way He had led them in the past.

Has that ever happened to you? God has led you in a particular way and you say, “That was such a clear way that He led me. Anytime He wants me to do something again, if He’ll lead me the same way He did last time, that’s what I’ll do.” But God isn’t committed to repeating any act twice. He may or He may not. I’m sure that Mary and Joseph’s daily conversations went something like this, as they held the decree of Caesar, Mary would say to Joseph, “Did you have any dreams last night?” Joseph was led by his dreams. “Did you dream last night? Is it time yet to go? Did God speak to you in a dream?” “No. Slept well. Slept soundly. No dreams.” Joseph would say to Mary, “Has the angel shown up again? Has Gabriel come around lately?” “No.” “Haven’t seen Gabriel either? What are we going to do? Let’s wait until you have a dream...”

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On and on. Until finally, it was a critical time and Joseph said, "I've got to leave. It's time to be there. I don't want to be absent when you give birth. Will you come with me?" And I'm sure Mary's parents were saying, "No! Stay here!" But without any means of direct leadership, indirectly, they are pulled by this decree down to Bethlehem.

Maybe or maybe not they were aware of the prophecy of Micah. Nazareth was a hill town. It's built on a hill. I can just picture Mary coming down that hill out of Nazareth on a donkey and looking back for one last time, wondering if she was doing the right thing.

I heard Dr. Dick Dobbins say to some ministers, talking about the will of God, "There are two concepts of the will of God that people live with. Some of them live with the concept of the will of God being a fork in the road, and if you miss one of the forks and get off on the wrong branch, then you're forever going the opposite way from God the rest of your life. You come to that moment and you make the wrong choice, and it's all over. You will never get back into God's will, if the will of God is a fork in the road." Another way of looking, however, at the will of God, which he thinks is a more accurate way, is that the will of God is a stream, a rushing stream. For a while, if you get disobedient in your life, you may step out of that stream. But that doesn't mean you have to stay out of the will of God for the rest of your life. Get back in the stream and get going where God is going. Maybe you're a little bit behind where you would have been if you'd kept in the stream, but get back in the stream.

Our life, even in moments when we don't have a sense of being led, has purpose and design. "He leadeth me, o blessed thought. O words with heavenly comfort fraught. What ere I do, where ere I be, still 'tis God's hand that leadeth me." We're all led by God if we belong to Christ and God many times leads us indirectly.

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I've used this story a lot of times when I talk about the will of God, the story of my glasses. I am partly what I am today because of this crazy thing. At the age of eight, God used these as a means of indirection in my life. I was breaking them so many times as a kid that my dad came to me and said, "Son, glasses are expensive [and they were. In those days—the early 1950s—they were eleven dollars and fifty cents—real money!]." Dad had a very limited salary and eleven dollars and fifty cents is like seventy-five or eighty dollars today. It was too much for a kid to go out and break his glasses every week playing basketball. So he said, "Son, you've got to quit mixing it up when you're playing basketball." So I quit mixing it up. And I started spending more time reading. I got to enjoy books so much, I was forging along, reading a book day. They had to practically poke me to get me to stir. I've often thought of that. Why I developed this interest in learning was probably because I had a pair of glasses. I always prayed to be healed. I'd just as soon not wear them but they were a means of God, indirectly leading me in life. Now that contacts are available, I realize I wouldn't have to wear them anymore, but then it wouldn't be me anymore. They become part of you. God leads us often indirectly.

### **III. The third thing about God leading us is, God will provide for those times when, after we have done our best, we still don't have things together.**

That's a great thing about serving God. I doubt that there is anybody in this room that totally has everything in their life absolutely together. All of us can think of some loose ends. But this Scripture is giving us a marvelous assurance that God provides for us in this time, that time in our life when we don't have everything together.

Joseph heads down to his ancestral home of Bethlehem, five miles south of Jerusalem. By the way, as an aside, I thought of the beautiful symbolism in the town of Bethlehem itself. Of the three major occasions in the Old Testament where it's used, the first time, it's a place of burial. It

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is where Jacob's wife is laid—Rachel. The second time it occurs, is in regard to a romance—Boaz and Ruth. And the third time, it is the birthplace and childhood home of David. The three major events of life are—death, weddings, and births. All three of those things had happened in Bethlehem.

Now Joseph comes back to his ancestral home and he doesn't have it all together. He has no family there, evidently, even though it's his ancestral home. There's no aunt or uncle. He can't knock on the door, "We're here! Can you put us up for a few days?" No relatives. He's not told anybody he's going to be there in advance. And he doesn't have a reservation in any of the inns. I know what it's like to arrive in Jerusalem without a reservation. A number of years ago, on our first trip to the Holy Land, we came into Jerusalem from Tel Aviv in a seven-seater Mercedes taxi, kind of a wild ride through Israel. You get to Jerusalem, you're let off at the station. Jewel and I are going to be there about five days. We have less than a hundred dollars on us. But we have our American Express card. It's all any American needs overseas. Pay for it later. We each had luggage in our hands. We'd been on a trip that included Yugoslavia. We were in downtown Jerusalem. I'm carrying two pieces of luggage, Jewel is carrying two pieces of whatever—hers were lighter than mine. It's about seven at night, about an hour before sunset. What we're looking for is a cheap hotel that takes American Express cards. There ain't no cheap hotels, that we found, that took American Express cards. Every one that was cheap wanted cash. So we walked and walked and the sun set and I began getting nervous. I said to Jewel, "I feel like Joseph and Mary!" We finally got to the King David hotel which is posh—five star. I knew we couldn't afford the King David, so I left Jewel in the lobby and walked across to the YMCA to see if they took American Express cards. We didn't want to let go of that cash in case until we had an emergency. This wasn't an emergency. They didn't take American Express cards. But

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meanwhile, Jewel had gone to the desk and said, “What’s your lowest room?” They said “Sixty dollars.” That was 1975, and that was kind of high. When Jewel came back, she told me, and I said, “I’m so nervous. I’m afraid of not having a place to sleep tonight. They take American Express cards, don’t they?” As they were writing us up, they wrote us up for a ninety-five dollars room. To which Jewel responded very indignantly, “You said that the lowest room was sixty dollars? How come you’re charging us ninety dollars?” He said, “Lady, you didn’t ask me what the lowest room available was, you just asked me what our lowest room was. That low room is not available.” We finally wound up on the Mount of Olives at forty-two dollars and would have been there had Jesus come that evening, which would be the right place to be! You wouldn’t want to be there as an unbeliever because it’s going to split in two, but it’s a great place to be when He does come, because you’ll be right there.

The feeling of knowing what it’s like to arrive in a place and not having it together—can you imagine how Joseph and Mary felt? There are two Greek words used for “inn.” One Greek word describes an inn as sort of an inn by nice standards: It has enclosures and it has a host and it has food. A nice apartment over where the animals are, so you can kind of relax and take off your shoes. The other kind of inn is sort of a place where you bring the animals. You might or you might not have an apartment over it. It might be closed or it might not be closed. You certainly don’t have any host, and you don’t have any food. You bring your own. That’s the kind of inn that Joseph and Mary would stop at—the Motel 6 or the Motel 4 of Bethlehem. And there’s no room.

They don’t have it together. There’s no midwife to help her when she goes out to the cave where the manger is, the feeding trough of the animals. No midwife, let alone a doctor. It’s so un-put together. Yet our inability to have things put together does not limit God in the least. That’s the

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great thing that comes out of this story. It's that inability to put things together that allows Him to display His personality in the way that is absolutely remarkable. He wants shepherds to get in and adore Christ, so for all times we can know that the whole world is welcome where the king of kings is born, in a place of vulnerability. There is no shepherd that I know of—a smelly shepherd—that would ever get inside of an inn. But out there, in the opening with the night star, all the poor and all the children and everybody who's been oppressed in their life can immediately identify with this story.

I'm reading Chuck Colson's book *Loving God*. He contrasts the way the world builds their system with the way God builds His system. He said "The thing in my life that is my greatest setback—going to prison—is the thing in my life that God has used most." It is when we are weak that we are strong. It is when we don't have it together that God puts it together. That is a lesson that comes out of Bethlehem.

Mary and Joseph are not to keep their eyes on the place they are in. They're to keep them on the person that has come to fill that place. We'll always be in trouble if we keep our eyes on the place we're in rather than the person who has come to us in that place.

**IV. The fourth great truth rising out of this passage is that Christ has been sent by God into our world in order to bring us into His world.**

The Lord doesn't set before us any ten-year managerial plan for our life, strategy for living for the next ten years and then that's it. He has a strategy of living that skips way beyond this life into the life to come. Christ has come into our world because God wants Him to build the room for us in His world. And He's come to give us the way of escape. We're on a threatened planet. We're on a doomed planet. A lot of people are talking about a nuclear holocaust as potential for ruining the world. I've got news for the politicians, the world passeth away and the lusts thereof.

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The elements shall dissolve with a fervent heat. There is no question that the world is going to end with a bang. It is going to end with a flash of fire. It is going to end in fire. The only questions are, “When is it going to happen?” And, “Who is going to do it?” We know who is going to do it, namely, God. We just don’t know when. But we know that it passes away. And we who dwell on the earth pass away as well.

I don’t think there has been a time in my life, other than this present moment, when I’ve been more keenly aware of that. Since the beginning of early March, when my father died, this church has known its share of tragedy and people whose lives, in their prime, have suddenly and inexplicably been taken from us.

I was sharing a humorous incident that happened to me. The day Harry had his heart attack, I went right down as soon as I heard to visit with Harry in the intensive care. I came out and, of course, family members were there. We waited for some time to get a report from his attending physician, the heart specialist, who ultimately came out; and there were maybe ten or fifteen of us standing in a circle in the hallway, having the doctor brief everybody that was there.

Suddenly, as I stood there in that hallway, in that stale air, I suddenly began to feel like I was going to pass out. I have never fainted in my life, so I don’t know really what the sensation of fainting is like. I thought to myself, “Am I having a heart attack? This would be the oddest of all odd things. I’ve come to visit my friend and wind up in the bed next to him. This is going to create a crack-up at the church. People are going to say, ‘Pastor goes to visit someone in intensive care and winds up in intensive care. What kind of a man of God is this?’” All of these crazy thoughts are going through my mind. Suddenly, things are getting a little reeling on me. I just, without saying anything, walked out of the circle, walked back to the waiting room and sat down. I put my head on my hands. People in the circle thought I’d just slipped out to pray. That’s

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what the pastors are supposed to do—pray. So I got along incognito until a little volunteer comes up and says, “Is there anything wrong?” I said, “I think something’s wrong. I don’t know what’s wrong with me.” I kept thinking, “I don’t feel any pain.” I kept checking myself out. I thought, “Maybe I am going to have something wrong. Maybe I’m going to die.” I always think of the worst that’s going to happen! Then when I know what that is and I can deal with that, I can deal with everything else that’s going to flow out of that.

I’ll confess to you, all of my life I have been afraid to die and I’ve been a Christian ever since I was ten and a pastor since I was twenty-nine. I’ve got some track record behind me, so I shouldn’t be existentially afraid of death. But suddenly, as I faced that I moment, I thought, “I don’t know what’s going to happen.” But, all of a sudden, I realized, as I checked my insides emotionally, “I’m not afraid—if this is the time, this is the time, so be it.” Praise God. I got so excited at that I actually wasn’t afraid. If this was my moment, I was ready to go. It’s marvelous. I said, “Lord, I’ve really got the rest of life conquered from here on out because if at this age I’ve got over that concern, I can handle anything else.”

But there is going to come a moment for everyone, when we’re going to have to let go. For some of us it’s going to be a lot sooner than we thought. For others, it may not be. But there is that moment, either by the Lord’s return or by our going, we will go to be with Him. The leadership of the Lord is therefore not for this life only. He was born in Bethlehem, that He might be born in our heart and that we might go to His place. He’s come on a rescue mission. He stands now at the door of our heart and knocks. I’ve often thought, “I wonder if the innkeeper had had any idea of who Jesus was, if he’d had the same response. If he’d have known that the king of glory was seeking entrance into his inn, wow! Open all the doors!” But he didn’t know; because that’s how God comes to us. He comes to us disguised. God comes to you this day, disguised in the form of

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a poor preaching voice—me. There's not an angel, bright shining, standing here. And there's no Lord of glory with all his responded standing here saying, "Come!" or "Let Me come to you!" There's just an attempt at a witness, telling you that Jesus wants entrance into your life. The Holy Spirit, gently tugging away, saying, "Let Him in." That's all the evidence you get, other than His Word. It says, "If you let Me in, I'll be a marvel and it'll be a glory, because you'll come to understand, I'll take you to My world."

### **Closing Prayer**

Our Father, O come to our heart, Lord Jesus. There is room in my heart for Thee. I pray for anyone here today—young or old—that has never had a personal experience in their life of accepting You as their Lord and Savior, that as this service closes, they would come from where they are sitting and share with one of the men or the women at the front this request, "I want to ask Jesus to be born in my life. I want Jesus to come into my heart." I pray that all over this sanctuary today there would be the swinging wide of heart doors opening to You. I pray, Lord, for others in this congregation who come to this service today feeling like they have lost their way. A cloud of thickness seems to have engulfed them and things do not appear as plain as they were days or months or years ago. Lord, in this time, when they have not seen a miracle, or in this time, when they've been, so to speak, on their own, You have never for a moment been absent from their side. I pray that, in this day, they would see You filling the place where they are. And although their circumstances may give them no clue as to their direction, they may have a sense that they are not lost because You are at their side. And You always know the way out. We thank You for the trust that grows in our heart as we follow You. And that in Your process of working with us, You come, not only to remove all of our sin, but to remove all of our fear, so that one day we may come into Your home, made righteous by You, purchased by You,

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pardoned by You, kept by You, made pure by You, Your great gift to us through Christ. Thank  
You, Lord. Amen.