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Sermon Notes

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## **The Kingdom of Christ: From Obscurity to Glory**

**Isaiah 53; Luke 2; Ezekiel 17**

Today we celebrate the birth of the King of Glory, Jesus Christ, into the humblest and most obscure circumstances. Today we peer into the darkness of a stable where animals were feeding and standing and resting and lowing and bleating... and a tiny baby is born, weak, unknown, the seed of a formerly glorious lineage that had fallen for almost six centuries into total obscurity.

This one born SO LOW would be exalted to INFINITE GLORY by the hand of God... born to reign as King of kings and Lord of lords; my focus today will be on the God-ordained obscurity of his birth... yes, GOD-ORDAINED OBSCURITY! It was predicted, it was decreed, it was personally worked by Almighty God

### I. Like a Shoot Out of Dry Ground

#### A. Isaiah's Prophecy

Isaiah the prophet spoke these words of prophecy seven centuries before they would be fulfilled:

***Isaiah 53:1-3 Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? <sup>2</sup> He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. <sup>3</sup> He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.***

The powerful image is that the Messiah, the Savior of the world will be completely unimpressive... NO MAJESTY that would attract anyone to him... nothing in his APPEARANCE... underwhelming to the eye... no radiant glory, no obvious display

We will speak more in detail about this marvelous prophecy later, but let me zero in on a central image:

**“He grew up before him like a tender shoot and like a root out of dry ground.”**

A powerful agricultural metaphor... speaking of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world, growing... which he did, from infancy to manhood; he grew up “before him” that is, in the presence of Almighty God, with God watching his growth; but the growth was like “tender shoot” meaning apparently weak, frail, unimpressive... and “like a root out of dry ground” ... his culture, his people, his nation were fruitless, dry, sterile, like a desert... no POWER, no GLORY, no PROSPECTS... a dry and weary land with nothing alive; but there is a tiny shoot, a little root with a small amount of activity... but not apparently amounting to anything at all

B. Like the “Dust Bowl”

I picture in my mind the “dust bowl” era of the American prairie farms of the 1930s... terrible drought and erosion and wind resulting in overpowering clouds of dust that destroyed all crops and drove a mass migration of poverty-stricken farmers west in order to survive.

John Steinbeck’s classic *Grapes of Wrath*, powerfully depicts the desperation of farmers in the mid-west seeing the dustbowl emerge, dust storms ravaging their crops and their hopes... nothing left but stunning poverty, desolation, emptiness, despair.

Steinbeck’s prose skillfully captures this desperation:

The wind grew stronger, whisked under stones, carried up straws and old leaves, and even little clods, marking its course as it sailed across the fields. The air and the sky darkened and through them the sun shone redly, and there was a raw sting in the air. During a night the wind raced faster over the land, dug cunningly among the rootlets of the corn, and the corn fought the wind with its weakened leaves until the roots were freed by the prying wind and then each stalk settled wearily sideways toward the earth and pointed the direction of the wind.

The people came out of their houses and smelled the hot stinging air and covered their noses from it. And the children came out of the houses, but they did not run or shout as they would have done after a rain. Men stood by their fences and looked at the ruined corn, drying fast now, only a little green showing through the film of dust. The men were silent and they did not move often. And the women came out of the houses to stand beside their men— to feel whether this time the men would break. The women studied the men's faces secretly, for the corn could go, as long as something else remained. The children stood nearby, drawing figures in the dust with bare toes, and the children sent exploring senses out to see whether men and women would break.

This was the DUST BOWL tragedy... the destruction of a hundred million acres of farmland, crops devastated, hopes utterly crushed... buried in billowing clouds of dust. The powerful question Steinbeck raised is whether this time, the dust storm which destroyed the corn would also break the spirits of the men. Crushed hopes.

### C. Israel's Dashed Hopes

So it was with Israel's Messianic hopes... a kingdom of words and dreams only, it seemed... of ancient prophecies that seemed to have absolutely no chance of coming true... of a worldwide empire of righteousness in which all nations on earth would submit to the power of the Son of David, the Messiah, reigning on a throne of majesty in Jerusalem

The house and lineage of David meant nothing, it seemed... the tree had been felled a long time ago... the lineage of Jesse was a STUMP left in a field... nothing stirring

So it was that holy night when Jesus was born, the Son of God, born to be King of Heaven and Earth...

But it did not appear so!

## II. The King of Glory Born in a Stable

### A. The Well-Known Narrative

***Luke 2:1-7 In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. <sup>2</sup> (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) <sup>3</sup> And everyone went to his own town to register. <sup>4</sup> So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. <sup>5</sup> He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. <sup>6</sup> While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, <sup>7</sup> and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.***

### B. The Stunning Contrast: Caesar Augustus vs Jesus Christ

#### 1. The Narrative Begins with the Most Powerful Man on Earth...

Caesar Augustus

- a. The First Roman Emperor... reigned from 27 BC until his death in AD 14
- b. Considered one of the greatest leaders in world history... he established the pattern of the Roman Empire under the Caesars for centuries to come
- c. He had been born Gaius Octavius; he was a great-nephew of Julius Caesar who was assassinated in 44 BC; Julius Caesar named him as his legal son and heir

- d. He won total control over the Roman Empire by the year 31 BC... four years later, in 27 BC, the Roman Senate voted him the title Augustus, meaning “Majestic One”... implied deity
  - e. by the time Jesus was born in 4 BC, Caesar Augustus was at the absolute height of his power
  - f. He ruled over a vast realm of 1.7 million square miles as 45 million people—about 20% of the world’s population at the time
  - g. He was so wealthy that, during an economic crisis for Asia Minor, he paid that region’s entire tax bill for one year out of his private coffers
  - h. He lived clothed in purple surrounded by marble columns dining on the finest meats and drinking the best wines
2. Jesus entered the world at the other end of the spectrum, though he was King of kings and Lord of lords
- a. He was born into poverty, the son (so it was supposed) of an obscure Jewish carpenter in a conquered backwater of the Empire
  - b. The actual circumstances of his birth are famous for their poignant aspects... humble in the extreme
  - c. Forced to migrate from their home village, they had to travel to Bethlehem to register
  - d. The reason they went to Bethlehem was that Joseph was of the house and lineage of David... the ancient king of Israel
  - e. But however glorious was the line of David back in their heyday, that line had fallen into total obscurity by this time... that will be a major theme of my sermon, as you shall see
  - f. But the birth of Jesus, the Son of David, was in total obscurity, and actually in far more distress than would have happened if he had been born in Nazareth, with his mother Mary surrounded by family and loving caregivers

- g. Instead of all that, they were desperately seeking a place to stay because her time had come and she was in the agonies of labor
- h. And of course, very famously, Joseph was refused any lodging in the Inn... there were too many people there in the tiny town of Bethlehem
- i. So Mary gave birth to Jesus surrounded, it would seem, by animals... because she laid him in a manger... a feeding trough for livestock
- j. Instead of a royal birth in which he was wrapped in purple silks, he was wrapped in swaddling cloths... of the lowest sort
- k. WHAT A STARK CONTRAST to the life of Caesar Augustus, the most powerful man on earth!

#### C. The Humble Origins of Christ's Birth Were Essential to God's Plan

1. God wanted his Son to be born into poverty and humility
2. There is no glory on earth that remotely compares with the glory Christ left in heaven
3. So no matter how powerful and wealthy was Caesar Augustus, how could any of his gold coins or his purple robes or his 25 legions of Roman soldiers compare with the glories of the heavenly realm of God the Father and God the Son
4. God willed that Christ should humble himself, to identify with us in our poverty and our weakness

***2 Corinthians 8:9 For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.***

***Philippians 2:6-7 Jesus, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, <sup>7</sup> but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.***

#### D. The Poverty of Jesus

1. Clearly Jesus was born into extremely low circumstances...
2. Very few babies are laid in mangers immediately after being born
3. I think of the standards of cleanliness required in all our Ob-Gyn centers where most American babies are born...
4. Indeed, around the world, the care given to babies is vastly higher than that which Jesus, the Son of God received that night
5. Shortly after his birth, Joseph and Mary had to flee to Egypt with the baby Jesus to escape the murderous King Herod
6. When the family returned, it was to Nazareth, an obscure and poverty-stricken area of Palestine where Joseph was a carpenter... a manual laborer
7. And Jesus' poverty would continue throughout his life... he told one of the people who wanted to follow him as a disciple

***Matthew 8:20 "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head."***

8. Jesus' disciples were walking through a grainfield on a Sabbath and were picking heads of grain and eating them, rubbing them between their palms to break them down... that was provision for only the poorest of the poor
9. Jesus' financial needs were met in part by the contributions of some women

***Luke 8:1-3 The Twelve were with him, <sup>2</sup> and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out; <sup>3</sup> Joanna the wife of Cuza, the manager of Herod's household; Susanna; and many others. These women were helping to support them out of their own means.***

10. But the clearest display of his poverty would come at the end of his life when he was arrested, condemned, and crucified... all his worldly belongings were confiscated from him and the soldiers gambled for them:

***John 19:23-24*** When the soldiers crucified Jesus, they took his clothes, dividing them into four shares, one for each of them, with the undergarment remaining. This garment was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom. <sup>24</sup> "Let's not tear it," they said to one another. "Let's decide by lot who will get it." This happened that the scripture might be fulfilled which said, "They divided my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing." So this is what the soldiers did.

Jesus died penniless, without a single possession on earth.

11. And his poverty was infinitely greater than material, for he was made to be sin for us and thus stripped for a time of fellowship with God

***2 Corinthians 5:21*** God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God

***Mark 15:34*** And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?"-- which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

E. All This to Make Us RICH!!!

***2 Corinthians 8:9*** For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.

1. Rich in forgiveness... 100% of our sins forgiven
2. Rich in love... for the Father and the Son have lavished all their love on us, and the Spirit has poured out that love into us

***Romans 5:8*** God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

***John 15:13*** Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends

***Romans 5:5*** God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.



3. And our wealth is just beginning... for we have an infinite inheritance of glory waiting for us in heaven
4. Rich in heavenly possessions... rich in heavenly dwelling places... rich in heavenly beauty... rich in heavenly health and joy and peace and pleasure...

F. So... Christ's Downward Journey Into Poverty Was Essential to Our Salvation

### III. The Humble Origins of Christ's Kingdom Predicted

A. As We've Seen: Clearly Asserted in Isaiah

***Isaiah 53:1-3 Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? <sup>2</sup> He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. <sup>3</sup> He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.***

The powerful image is that the Messiah, the Savior of the world will be completely unimpressive... NO MAJESTY that would attract anyone to him... nothing in his APPEARANCE... underwhelming to the eye... no radiant glory, no obvious display

The image Isaiah used was agricultural... **"Like a tender shoot, like a root out of dry ground..."**

Isaiah had said it earlier... with the idea of Israel becoming a tree that was felled leaving a stump in the ground seemingly lifeless, with no future...

Isaiah was sent to prophecy about the destruction of the Jewish nation:

***Isaiah 6:11-13 Then I said, "For how long, O Lord?" And he answered: "Until the cities lie ruined and without inhabitant, until the houses are left deserted and the fields ruined and ravaged, <sup>12</sup> until the LORD has sent everyone far away and the land is utterly forsaken.***

***13 And though a tenth remains in the land, it will again be laid waste. But as the terebinth and oak leave stumps when they are cut down, so the holy seed will be the stump in the land."***

Then came a SHOOT from the STUMP

***Isaiah 11:1-3 A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. 2 The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him-- the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD-- 3 and he will delight in the fear of the LORD***

This is Christ... rising like a SHOOT from a STUMP

Ezekiel said the same thing about the destruction of the monarchy of Judah, the kingly line of David, being reduced to total obscurity. The prophet Ezekiel ministered during the days of the exiles to Babylon... and I do say "exiles" because they happened in three stages. The first stage, Nebuchadnezzar invaded Judah and conquered it and came to Jerusalem and made Jehoiakim, King of Judah, his vassal. That meant he swore allegiance to Nebuchadnezzar, and so the King of Babylon left him as a puppet king in his own land. But then Jehoiakim rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar. God was angry that he did this, because he wanted Judah to be disciplined for their sins... so God sent raiders into the land and plundered Judah.

Jehoiakim died, and Jehoiachin his son succeeded him as King of Judah... still in rebellion against Babylon. So Nebuchadnezzar came out personally with his army to Jerusalem and besieged it. Jehoiachin and his mother and all his officials came out of Jerusalem and surrendered to Nebuchadnezzar, who take them captive. Also Nebuchadnezzar took all the sacred vessels from the temple and all the gold articles Solomon had accumulated in Jerusalem... he stripped the city entirely of its wealth; but he left it intact... the temple still standing, the walls still in place. And he took Mattaniah, Jehoiachin's uncle, a member of the lineage of David, and changed his name to Zedekiah... and Nebuchadnezzar make Zedekiah puppet king over what was

left of Judah and Jerusalem. Zedekiah swore an oath of personally allegiance to Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, to be his servant. Nebuchadnezzar then carried into exile the Jewish counselors, nobles, warriors, craftsmen... anyone of value... leaving Zedekiah as puppet king of a weakened kingdom.

But Zedekiah was an evil man and rebelled against the Lord and also against Nebuchadnezzar, his master, to whom he had sworn allegiance. So, Nebuchadnezzar came a third time with his undefeated army of Babylonian warriors... and he besieged Jerusalem. Now the city of Jerusalem is extremely hard to conquer... it is well-situated up high on a mountain, and it is surrounded by deep gullies... extremely hard to conquer. It took mighty Nebuchadnezzar almost two years of siege to finally break through. But the starvation in the city forced Zedekiah to try to escape, which he attempted to do with his army at night. But he was captured... brought to Nebuchadnezzar and his sons were slaughtered before his eyes... the sons of David, descendants of David... and then Nebuchadnezzar put out Zedekiah's eyes, put him in shackles of bronze and carried him in a cage to Babylon where he executed him.

And in a rage, Nebuchadnezzar's army completely destroyed Jerusalem... burned the temple of Solomon to the ground; reduced the walls to rubble; burned the houses to the ground; slaughtered anyone who resisted, and left no one but the poorest people in the land.

Thus was the lineage of David reduced to the lowest level of poverty. There were still descendants of David, "sons of David" physically alive – God made sure of that. But they had absolutely no power, no fame, no glory. They were like a low spreading vine on the forest floor.

That's what Ezekiel spoke:

*Ezekiel 17:5-6 He took some of the seed of your land and put it in fertile soil. He planted it like a willow by abundant water, <sup>6</sup> and it sprouted and became a low, spreading vine.*

*Ezekiel 17:12-14 The king of Babylon went to Jerusalem and carried off her king and her nobles, bringing them back with him to Babylon. <sup>13</sup> Then he took a member of the royal family and made a treaty with him, putting him under oath. He also carried away the leading men of the land, <sup>14</sup> so that the kingdom would be brought low, unable to rise again, surviving only by keeping his treaty.*

*Ezekiel 19:10-14 "Your mother was like a vine in your vineyard planted by the water; it was fruitful and full of branches because of abundant water. <sup>11</sup> Its branches were strong, fit for a ruler's scepter. It towered high above the thick foliage, conspicuous for its height and for its many branches. <sup>12</sup> But it was uprooted in fury and thrown to the ground. The east wind made it shrivel, it was stripped of its fruit; its strong branches withered and fire consumed them. <sup>13</sup> Now it is planted in the desert, in a dry and thirsty land. <sup>14</sup> Fire spread from one of its main branches and consumed its fruit. No strong branch is left on it fit for a ruler's scepter.' This is a lament and is to be used as a lament."*

This is the prophetic image of the Jewish nation as a whole, but especially the kingly line of David.

A shoot growing out of dry ground... seemingly with no future at all... a mighty and glorious tree levelled until there is nothing left but a stump in the land

A straggly vine crawling on the ground searching for water... and finding enough to survive but not enough to be anything other than a low, weak, vine... a leafy vine with no fruit

Humbled... obscure... weak... powerless... nothing mighty enough for a scepter;

**"Like a shoot out of dry ground..."**

B. So... Joseph of Nazareth was both "a SON OF DAVID" and TOTALLY OBSCURE

The genealogy of Jesus in Matthew 1 covers 42 generations, broken into three groups of 14... the first 28 are relatively famous; but from the exile of Babylon until Jesus, not one of those men is famous; they are all "Sons of David" but completely weak and obscure... living in Babylon or in Palestine... who knows where?

Joseph was called by the angel Gabriel a "Son of David"

***Matthew 1:20-21 an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. <sup>21</sup> She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."***

But... he was a carpenter in an obscure town in northern Galilee, a despised backwater of Jewish life; a conquered people in a land dominated by Gentiles, especially by the mighty Romans under Caesar Augustus; with no end in sight

#### IV. From Humble Obscurity to Infinite Glory

A. BUT the Future Is Unspeakably Glorious!

B. Isaiah 11

***Isaiah 11:1-10 A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. <sup>2</sup> The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him-- the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD-- <sup>3</sup> and he will delight in the fear of the LORD. He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears; <sup>4</sup> but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked. <sup>5</sup> Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist. <sup>6</sup> The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. <sup>7</sup> The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. <sup>8</sup> The infant will play near the***

*hole of the cobra, and the young child put his hand into the viper's nest. <sup>9</sup> They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea. <sup>10</sup> ¶ In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his place of rest will be glorious.*

The shoot from the stump of Jesse is Jesus, the King of the Kingdom of Heaven...

The Spirit of the Lord rests on him to build a worldwide kingdom of peace and justice and righteousness

The "earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea"

And it will include Gentiles... for the Root of Jesse will stand as a BANNER FOR THE NATIONS... a multitude from every nation on earth will gather around Jesus and worship and obey him

And his place of rest will be GLORIOUS!! The New Jerusalem will shine with the glory of God and of Christ forever.

### C. Ezekiel 17

1. Remember Ezekiel's vision was of the house of David being reduced to weak obscurity like a low vine, unable to rise, dominated by Gentile power

2. But not forever!

*Ezekiel 21:27 A ruin! A ruin! I will make it a ruin! It will not be restored until he comes to whom it rightfully belongs; to him I will give it*

3. The image in Ezekiel 17 is majestic

*Ezekiel 17:22-24 "This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I myself will take a shoot from the very top of a cedar and plant it; I will break off a tender sprig from its topmost shoots and plant it on a high and lofty mountain. <sup>23</sup> On the mountain heights of Israel I will plant it; it will produce branches and bear fruit and become a splendid cedar.*

***Birds of every kind will nest in it; they will find shelter in the shade of its branches. <sup>24</sup> All the trees of the field will know that I the LORD bring down the tall tree and make the low tree grow tall. I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish. "I the LORD have spoken, and I will do it.***

Awesome! God himself will plant a tiny shoot on the top of Israel's mountain heights... on Mount Zion, Jerusalem; this tender sprig is Christ... apparently weak and frail

But it will grow and grow and become a MIGHTY CEDAR... a mighty cedar that will BEAR FRUIT! Cedars are coniferous... with needles and cones for seeds... no fruit to eat, that's for sure;

But this is mixed image of a mighty tree, as tall as the tallest cedar, with abundant branches and shade on its branches and lavish fruit on all its branches... a home for birds of every kind

Clearly a picture of the diverse and majestic kingdom of Christ... people from every tribe and language and nation and culture around the world

It reminds me of the parable of the mustard seed:

***Mark 4:30-32 "What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? <sup>31</sup> It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest seed you plant in the ground. <sup>32</sup> Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds of the air can perch in its shade."***

D. Fulfilled in Christ's Atoning Death... and the Spread of the Gospel of Christ to the Ends of the Earth

1. This rise from obscurity to glory is fulfilled in Christ's death and his resurrection and the spread of the gospel

***John 12:24 Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.***

Christ was never weaker and more obscure than when he died

But from his death has come infinite fruit... infinite glory...  
spreading to the ends of the earth and to the end of time into  
eternity

V. Applications for Christmas

- A. Meditate on the Rise of Christ from Obscurity to Glory
- B. Understand that Christ Became Poor so that We Might Become Rich
- C. Ponder the Cost of Your Salvation
- D. Ponder the Riches of your Eternal Inheritance
- E. Enjoy Your Christmas Celebration!